

THE MYSTERY OF GAILY MORE

J.P.MILNE

2 This Book

James T. Macdonald

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THE MYSTERY OF
GAILY MORE

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THE MYSTERY OF GAILY MORE

BY

J. PATERSON MILNE

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The Adventures of Jig & Co.", &c.

Illustrated by Leo Bates

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The Mystery of Gaily More

CHAPTER I

First Meeting with Gaily More

Hazel wished that the train would start. The clerkess, who had been detailed to see her off, was quite evidently wishing the same, but was doing her best to be polite.

"And you'll remember, Miss Hazel," she repeated for about the third time, "Mr. Golding says you're not to bother to write. He'll get your school report at the end of the term, and that'll let him know how you're getting on, and——"

"He'll make arrangements for my holidays," Hazel finished for her, rather wearily.

The clerkess looked a little hurt, but as the train began to move at that moment her expression changed to one of relief.

"Good-bye," she called, "good luck!" and she waved perfunctorily to the disappearing carriage.

"Poor kid!" she commented to herself as she hurried out of the station, bent on performing some hasty shopping during her unexpected release from the office. "It's not much of a home-coming for her. Just as well she looks one that could stand up for herself—she'll need it!"

With which reflection she promptly put her recent charge out of her mind, fully expecting, if she thought about it at all, never to hear of her again—an opinion which later events were to prove to be very far indeed from the case.

Meanwhile Hazel, feeling slightly more forlorn than before, was settling down in the corner seat. The compartment contained one other passenger—a girl of about her own age—who now grinned across at her in friendly fashion.

“You seem to be as much wanted in this universe as I am,” she remarked conversationally, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Hazel flushed, and the other made haste to apologize.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “but I couldn’t help overhearing what was said just now, and it was so like the kind of thing I’ve been getting myself that—that—well, I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings—truly, I didn’t,” and once more she smiled so engagingly that Hazel found herself beaming back at her without quite intending to do so.

For a few seconds they scrutinized each other in silence, and this time it was Hazel who spoke first. She crinkled her brows. “Oh!” she said suddenly, “I’ve been wondering why you looked so queer. We’re really terribly like each other, aren’t we?”

That did it. The other girl went off into peals of laughter, and Hazel this time joined in, till tears of merriment were running down her cheeks.

“Oh, I do feel better,” she gasped, “but please stop. I—I don’t know when I’ve laughed so much,” and she promptly went off into a fresh spasm.

"Yes, you *do* look the better for that," said the girl opposite, recovering her gravity with surprising suddenness. "You were much too solemn looking, even if you *are* going to school, and even if nobody wants you to bother to write to them. I wish *I* were going to school!"

Hazel sat up.

"Oh, aren't you? Somehow, I thought——"

The other shook her head.

"No. I'm going to live with an aunt whom I don't know, who's never seen me, and who, I'm sure, doesn't want me. Cheerful, isn't it? By the way, my name's——" she stopped with a chuckle—"prepare for a shock. It's Abigail More—awful, isn't it? But I'm glad to say I'm always known as 'Gaily'."

"Gaily More," repeated Hazel. "That's rather nice, I think. I'm Hazel Warnford, and I'd better tell you my life history. It won't take long, so you won't be bored. I've no parents—they were both killed in a motor accident when I was a baby—no relatives that I know of, no anybody. I've lived up till now with my old nurse, but she died a week ago, and my guardian is just the lawyer who looks after things. As you could hear, *he's* not wanting to be bothered with me and—well, that's really all, except that I'm going to St. Margaret's at Cheppingston, and I'd do anything not to be. I hate the idea of school. I've never been to one, and I don't know anything that other girls will know. I've just read a lot, otherwise I'm the most ignorant being under the sun." She smiled wryly. "Now—it's your turn!"

But Gaily More's eyes were dancing with excitement.

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"I say, have you *really* no relatives, and do you *really* not want to go to school—just now, anyway?"

Hazel nodded in puzzled fashion. "I certainly don't like the idea of school, and as for relatives, I suppose I have some few, very far-out ones, but I don't even know their names, and none of them has ever been to see me. But what about it?"

The other hesitated.

"I—I wondered if you'd 'swop' with me," she said at last, with disarming simplicity. "I'm going to Cheppingston too—that's where my aunt stays, but—but for reasons that I can't tell you just now, I'd be tremendously glad not to go there, say for about a week. Would you—*could* you, do you think, exchange places with me for that time? There'd be a frightful row at the end of it, I expect, but I'd take all the blame. Oh, do say yes. You've no idea what a help it would be, and nobody would ever suspect. We're really, as you said, frightfully like each other, but even that doesn't matter so tremendously, for nobody knows either of us by sight. It just gave me the idea, that was all. Please say you will. You know it'll be great fun—and it's only for a week."

Hazel began to wonder if she were quite sane. Was the girl really in earnest that she should exchange identities with her for a week? What on earth could she be wanting it for? Could she—here Hazel stirred uncomfortably—could she possibly have done something wicked or dishonourable, and be trying to shift the blame on to her shoulders? Her lips were in the very act of framing a refusal when the girl seemed to sense her thoughts.

Her face flushed hotly.

"You don't think, do you, that I'm trying to let you in for anything mean or dishonourable? I surely don't look the sort of person who would do a thing like that? I give you my word of honour that there's nothing like that in it. The only reason I'm not telling you all about it is that it would make it more difficult for you to play your part." Her voice dropped again to a low and persuasive note. "What about it then—Hazel? Are you game? It's only for a week, and it's bound to be tremendous fun—and besides, you'll be helping me just *enormously!*"

Her eyes danced mischievously, beseechingly, and Hazel felt an answering excitement stir within her. Why shouldn't she after all? She'd never had any sort of adventures; she'd always longed for some, and now when the chance was offered she was hesitating about taking it. A final glance at the merry, eager face fixed so pleadingly on her own decided her.

Impulsively she held out her hand.

"All right, Gaily!" she said, "I will."

Solemnly they shook hands upon it.

"For a week I promise to be Hazel Warnford," said Gaily More.

"For a week I promise to be Gaily More," said Hazel Warnford.

"And here's good luck to us both!" said Gaily, snatching off her hat and throwing it up to the roof.

"Careful, young ladies, be careful!" said a pleasant voice from the corridor, and they both started round to see a pleasant-faced old gentleman with white hair beaming benignly upon them.

"In my young days," he remarked, shaking his head, "I don't think I was ever so happy when I was returning to school. Of course, schools are happier places nowadays—maybe not any better though, no—not any better!" and still shaking his head, and without waiting for any comment, he continued his stroll.

"Bother!" said Gaily. "I'd hoped we'd have managed to change our hats and coats before anyone noticed us. However, I don't think he'll matter—he was just one of those usual fussy old people."

Hazel hesitated. "I wonder," she said. "You know, he gave me a queer feeling as if he were taking in every detail of our appearance. I expect it was just imagination on my part—he probably wouldn't know us again if he saw us."

"He won't know that you're not me and that I'm not you now, anyhow," giggled Gaily, struggling into Hazel's regulation school coat. "In fact, you look so like me in that rig-out that I begin to wonder myself which of us I am!"

Hazel laughed.

"That's how I'm feeling too. It's going to be frightfully difficult all the same for me to remember that my name's 'Gaily'. And, by the way, talking about names, what's your aunt's name, and where does she live? I shall have to know something about her and, goodness!"—she glanced at her watch—"in about ten minutes we ought to be at Cheppingston."

Not for the first time that day Hazel felt a twinge of uneasiness, for once again there was a strange hesitancy in the other's manner.

"Oh, I know this must sound queer, and—and

sort of suspicious to you, but truly it's all right. I—I can't tell you my aunt's name, for I don't know it. I—I"—there was a note of almost desperation in her voice—"I'll tell you what were my instructions. At Cheppingston I am to look for a tall lady dressed in black, and wearing a red flower. I am to approach her and say, 'I am Abigail More', and to give her the letter which you'll now find in my coat pocket——"

Hazel, feeling more dazed than ever, confirmed the presence of the letter, and the other went on:

"I know I am to stay at the 'Grange', but that's really the only definite fact that I have to go on. And now," she looked quizzically, but with a return of merriment, "do you still feel like going on, or do you want to draw back?"

Everything reasonable, everything sensible in Hazel's composition urged her to take this chance of still retreating from the absurd compact that she had made, but some spirit of recklessness and perhaps the merest hint of mockery in the dancing eyes of this strange girl made her reject all the warnings of her saner nature.

"Certainly not," she retorted, a little stiffly. "I gave my word and, of course, I'll keep it."

Next moment, rather disconcertingly, she felt two arms thrown round her neck, and herself being hugged most vigorously. "Oh, Hazel, you're a darling! I'll never forget this. You don't know how amazingly you're helping me. But remember, the help is all to me. If there were any danger or trouble, I'd never let you in for it—you do believe that, don't you?"

Hazel was spared the difficulty of replying by the slowing down of the train.

"Cheppington!" they exclaimed simultaneously.

Gaily's manner became quick, almost conspiratorial.

"You'll remember, then," she almost whispered, "but now we'd better not be seen coming out together. I'll go farther along the train." Once more her eyes twinkled in the disarming fashion that had been Hazel's undoing.

"Good-bye, then, Gaily, for a week," said Gaily More holding out her hand.

"Good-bye, Hazel, for a week," said Hazel Warnford, shaking it solemnly.

Next moment, with a sinking feeling that refused to be laughed at, she saw the girl who was to impersonate her disappearing rapidly along the corridor.

"What an easy job she has compared with mine!" she couldn't help thinking, and then, as the train came to a standstill with a screeching of brakes, she mentally shook herself. Anyhow—it was only for a week. Surely she could get through that, and surely Gaily—the real Gaily—would lose no time in putting things right then?

If she, or Gaily, had been able to foresee what the next few days held in store for them, they would not so lightly have entered into their cheerful compact.

Fortunately, neither of them could know the stirring events which awaited them, and, comfortably thinking that she had said good-bye for a week to her quaint companion, Hazel stepped from the train.

Now all she had to do was to find her aunt, who was *not* her aunt, and whose very name she did not know!

CHAPTER II

Arrival at the Grange

In a state that was rapidly verging on panic, Hazel watched the station platform gradually emptying. Long ago, or so it had seemed, she had watched, without appearing to do so, the real Gaily More being greeted by a tall lady with a pleasant face, one of the mistresses, she assumed, from St. Margaret's, and being ushered out with a kindly protectiveness that made Hazel feel more forlorn and desolate than ever.

What a fool she had been, she told herself for the hundredth time. Nobody, certainly, had cared much about her before, but at least arrangements for her continued existence and education had been made, and here she was, wilfully having exchanged all that security for a mere whim—just because a girl with an attractive, merry face had somehow appealed to her sense of adventure, just because—— Here, her thoughts broke off in a perfect riot of something that was next door to terror.

What if Gaily More's story had been all made up? What if no one came to look for her? What on earth was she to do? What——?

But just as she reached this stage of panic she caught her breath, for here at least was confirmation of one part of Gaily's story. Into the station entrance, opposite which she was standing, had hurried a tall, slender woman dressed in black, and wearing a vivid red flower in the collar of her coat.

She looked around in a flustered, excited fashion, and then, quite suddenly, her eyes lighted upon Hazel. She stood perfectly still, but Hazel could feel the intense scrutiny to which she was being subjected, and with a little thrill moved forward.

"Now for it!" she breathed to herself, and gathering all her confidence together she approached the stranger briskly.

"I am Abigail More," she said, feeling her face grow hot at the untruth, but she was committed now to the venture, and dared not draw back. "I think it is for me you are looking, is it not? I have a letter for you in my pocket."

When she had finished her little speech, she stole a glance at the other's face, and experienced an odd sense of surprise.

It was a younger face than she had for some reason anticipated, and in many ways a kinder face, but there was at the same time, though she was not able to put the feeling into words, a withdrawn quality about it that struck a chill into her heart. It gave nothing away, and the blue, rather beautiful eyes, and the pleasantly shaped mouth, although at the moment framed in a smile of welcome, were cold and remote.

"So you are Abigail More," she said, after a slight pause, and held out her hand. "Yes," she added, as they shook hands, "you are very much as I pictured you—after all these years." The last few words were murmured almost to herself, but Hazel was sure that her ears had heard aright. "Yes—very much the same and yet——" she scrutinized her again with a look of puzzledness. "You said you had a letter?"

she demanded briskly—the crisp tones contrasting strangely with her previous easy, well-bred speech.

Hazel fished in her pocket and drew out the envelope—an envelope, as she had already noticed, that was innocent of any superscription. The stranger took it eagerly, and opened it at once.

The contents of the single sheet which it contained were apparently brief, but her face cleared as she read.

“Well,” she exclaimed, folding the letter carefully and putting it in her handbag, “that is quite definite. Come along, Abigail, I am sure you are tired after your journey, and hungry, too, I should think. Oh, by the way, although you don’t know me, you must call me Aunt Mildred—Mildred Fenniston, to be exact. I live at the Grange. Come along now—the car is waiting.”

As Hazel followed her out to an opulent-looking saloon car, the door of which was held open by a smartly-uniformed chauffeur, she felt a return of all her former uneasiness and distrust. “You must call me Aunt Mildred,” the other had said, not “*I am* your Aunt Mildred” as anyone would have expected, and ridiculous as it might seem, Hazel felt sure that she hadn’t known *what* she wished her to call her, until she had read the mysterious note!

For the moment, however, she was too tired to think about it. She sank back gratefully on the soft grey upholstery of the car’s interior, and felt the machine glide forward. The die was cast—she could not draw back even if she would.

The drive was completed practically in silence, her Aunt Mildred saying nothing further than “This is

the Grange now," when, some ten minutes later, they arrived at a high oaken gate which the chauffeur had to alight to open.

Hazel felt her heart sink as they proceeded through an avenue of trees, flanked by a coppice on both sides. The Grange must be a house of some pretensions when it was surrounded by grounds of this sort, but equally it must be terribly lonely and isolated, cut off from any neighbours by these forbidding trees.

Yet, when the actual house came into view, standing on a terrace of velvet lawn, and approached by a trimly edged gravel sweep, she could not restrain an exclamation of pleasure.

"What a lovely house!" she cried. "I do love those twisted chimneys and nobbly turrets. Don't you—Aunt Mildred?" She gulped down the slight hesitation before the name, and felt she had got it out quite creditably, but from her companion there was no reply.

She glanced sharply round, and was amazed to see her face, which had appeared to her so inexpressive, now almost contorted with—what was it? Fear? Surprise? Anger? Or a mixture of all three?

The dark, beautiful eyes were staring through the window of the car straight at the house which they were approaching. Hazel followed the direction of her gaze and saw, or fancied she saw, just as the car drew to a standstill, a face at a turret window on the top-most floor. If it had been, it disappeared the very second that her eyes imagined they saw it. Could her eyes, too, have imagined the hand that had seemed roughly to pull whoever it was out of sight?

There was no time for conjecture. Aunt Mildred, as if conscious of her scrutiny, turned briskly.

"Well, here we are, Abigail. Did I hear you say you liked the Grange? I'm sure I hope you will continue to do so."

As she uttered the last words, kind enough as they sounded, she turned and looked at her supposed niece. Hazel caught a glint in the cold eyes and felt an icy shudder run through her. "I hope you will continue to do so." Were the words meant as they seemed, or did they contain a hidden threat?

As she followed her aunt through the door, which was held open by a grim-faced manservant, she felt the dimness of the panelled hall strike chill upon her. It was beautiful inside, as it was out, but there was a sinister quality in its beauty. The great wide staircase, which swept upwards, seemed to lose itself in a mysterious dusk, lightened only dimly by a stained-glass window above the landing. The rich rugs of hall and stair gave the feeling of being there to muffle, almost to stifle, all sound. An honest, wholesome footfall would have seemed an intrusion.

There was little time, however, for Hazel to indulge such fancies.

"Come with me and I shall show you your room. Take careful note of your directions as you go, for it is very easy to lose oneself in the Grange."

Indeed it must be, Hazel commented inwardly, as she followed her Aunt Mildred along innumerable passages, and up and down a bewildering number of twisting stairs. She was on the point of confessing that she had completely lost her bearings, when at last they

reached her room, and her pleasure at sight of it quite drove all other feelings from her mind.

It was so different. That was the first thing that struck her. To enter it was to enter into a different atmosphere from the rest of that oppressive house.

It was bright, with wide-opening lattice windows, through which she could catch a glimpse of the velvet lawn. A bowl of yellow and bronze chrysanthemums stood on the dressing-table, a well-filled bookcase occupied the far corner, and the bed, with its dainty blue silk coverlet and quilt, was almost hidden from view by a richly-worked screen.

Hazel could not restrain her exclamations of delight, and for a moment Aunt Mildred smiled at her obvious pleasure.

"I can hardly believe it," Hazel went on unguardedly, "it's so different in—in spirit, from everywhere else. It's as if an entirely different person had thought it out, and planned it. Oh, perhaps it was *you*?" and she rounded on her companion impulsively.

Not for the first time that day, she felt an icy shiver go through her as she looked at the other's face. It was staring at her with an expression almost of horror, of unbelief, but this quickly gave way to anger.

"No, I had nothing to do with it," came the sharp retort, "and I must say you are much too fanciful for a young girl. Come down as soon as you are ready. Tea is in the library—the second door on your right at the foot of the stairs."

"Yes, Aunt Mildred," Hazel managed to answer meekly, and watched the door being shut with a feeling of relief.

Yet the elation, which the sight of the pleasant little room had brought, persisted. Somehow the walls appeared to wrap her round with friendliness, and a feeling of safety. She breathed a sigh of thankfulness as she pulled off Gaily More's hat and coat, and tidied her hair.

At any rate, Gaily More would not have as pleasant a room at St. Margaret's. In this, at least, she was sure she had the best of the bargain. Smiling for the first time, she made her way out into the passage again, and proceeded to find her way downstairs. It was, however, easier to purpose, than to do. The passage twisted and twined, and opened into intersecting passages to the right and to the left, until she felt completely bewildered. The main staircase she could not locate at all.

She paused for an instant where, at a bend, a short flight of stairs turned upwards. Should she go up, she wondered, or carry straight on? As if in answer to her hesitation there came a sound, which caused her to stiffen, and brought back with a rush all the panicky thoughts that had beset her before. She tried to fight down her imagination, but as the sound repeated itself, she knew that her first instinct had been right. It *was* a groan—a despairing, heart-broken groan, and it came from a room at the top of the stairs.

Without pausing to think, Hazel darted noiselessly up, but with her hand in the very act of turning the handle she hesitated, for from the room within had come another sound—a woman's voice, low, compelling, harsh, and talking with a fierce urgency.

Against her will Hazel found herself straining to

catch the words, but without success. Now she was tempted to knock and ask if anything was wrong, but a sudden footfall crossing the floor, and the voice becoming audible for a second: "You'll spoil everything—*everything*, do you hear?" made her turn in a blind impulse of flight, and race down the stairs again.

It was as well she had done so, for above her, she could hear the door being opened and imagined that she could feel stealthy eyes searching all around, and she shivered with a mixture of fear and thankfulness. There had been a quality in that dimly-heard voice that made her unwilling to face its owner—particularly in the suspicious way that she must have met her had she lingered further.

Whether now by good luck, or because she had actually been in the right direction all along, the next bend brought her to the main staircase, and a few seconds later found her diffidently pushing open the library door.

But the surprises of that amazing day were not yet over. The tea-table was drawn up invitingly before the fire, for the October air was chilly, and on the one side of the hearth sat her supposed Aunt Mildred. But it was the figure standing at the other side that made Hazel catch her breath with a rush of apprehension. Beaming benignly upon her, just as he had done on her and the real Gaily More in the train, was the pleasant-faced, white-haired old gentleman who had appeared so suddenly at the door of their carriage.

He shook hands now with the same show of pleasant friendliness, and for the moment Hazel felt ashamed of her suspicions. Yet inwardly she knew she was not

mistaken. The eyes, so kindly and bland at first seeming, were cold and piercing, and Hazel knew even before she spoke that he recognized her, perhaps even detected her exchange with Gaily More.

"Dear me! Dear me!" he exclaimed, with what she knew was pretended surprise. "We travelled down by the same train, I think. But there were two of you when I last saw you, were there not? I felt sure you must be twins, you were so much alike!"

CHAPTER III

Great-Uncle Herbert and Aunt Mildred

When she thought over it later, Hazel was amazed at the ease with which she had met the awkward situations of that first tea-party. Perhaps it was that tea itself had been so tempting, and that she had been so genuinely hungry and ready for it, and, moreover, there had been no lack of hospitality on the part of her hosts, who had plied her so generously with dainties that she began to feel ashamed of her distrustful thoughts.

On the whole, however, things were made easy for her. There was no probing into her previous history—which Hazel naturally had dreaded, but which now she told herself, they probably hadn't required to ask about. They would know it so much better than she did herself!

And she on her part was granted enlightenment on a few points, without having to ask for it. The white-haired gentleman was addressed by Aunt Mildred as "Dad", and she was informed that he was her "Great-Uncle Herbert".

"But, of course, you couldn't possibly have known me," he beamed. "I haven't seen you since you were a baby. In fact, I believe if I'd had to pick you out, I'd have been fixing on the other girl who was with you in the train. There was just a shade of difference in her that seemed to fit in with my recollections. Which just shows," he concluded, "how undependable one's recollections can be!"

Hazel repressed an inner shudder. Was it imagination, or were the crafty old eyes watching her more keenly even than before, and was there a slight stiffening into suspicion on the part of Aunt Mildred?

She managed to laugh naturally in a way that surprised herself.

"Weren't we awfully alike?" she remarked in the most casual voice possible. "We were just laughing about it when you saw us in the train. She came off at Cheppingston too. She's going to a school called St. Margaret's. I saw one of the mistresses meeting her before you arrived, Aunt Mildred. Her name's Hazel Warnford."

If she had said that she was the "Queen of England", she could not have caused a greater sensation.

From Aunt Mildred's lips escaped a quickly-stifled exclamation. But, though she had tried to cover it up, Hazel felt sure that what she had said was "Already?".

Great-Uncle Herbert too was obviously shaken out

of his usual blandness, but was disguising it to the best of his ability.

"Dear me! Dear me! This *is* a surprise," he commented.

"Why, do you know her?" queried Hazel innocently. It gave her an odd feeling thus to be talking about herself, as if she were the merest casual acquaintance.

"Well, no, not the young lady herself, but we know of her. And I myself knew her parents very well some ten years ago. Poor things, they were both killed most tragically——"

"Yes, in a motor accident," put in Hazel unguardedly.

"How did you know that?" The question was fired like a rifle-shot from Aunt Mildred.

Hazel jumped. "Why, she told me," she almost stuttered, then, recovering her poise, she added, "It happened when she was just a baby. She's been staying with an old nurse in the country, but now she's been sent to school. She seemed to be hating the thought of it, too."

Great-Uncle Herbert and Aunt Mildred exchanged glances, and Hazel fancied that she could detect a slight measure of relief in their looks. Evidently her unconcerned offering of information had allayed their suspicions—whatever they might be.

"You seem to have got on very well with her," remarked Great-Uncle Herbert genially. "We must have her over to visit you, but, of course, you'll be renewing acquaintanceship with her before that. What do you think, Mildred?"

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His daughter nodded, and Hazel looked from one to the other in perplexity.

Great-Uncle Herbert rubbed his hands as if enjoying the joke.

"Hal hal!" he chuckled. "I suppose you were sympathizing with your little friend about going to school—but what did you think was going to happen to yourself?"

Hazel's heart gave a jump. Was she, too, to go to St. Margaret's after all? She almost laughed aloud at the absurd situation that seemed about to arise. Her smile seemed to encourage Great-Uncle Herbert.

"That's good," he approved, in his slightly wheezy voice. "You don't mind, eh? Well, to-morrow Mildred will take you over to St. Margaret's and see if they'll enrol you. They'll have to let you back here at the week-ends, of course. We can't do without you altogether, now that we have you at last."

"At last!" echoed Hazel's mind. What exactly did that mean? And Aunt Mildred's voice cut in with a warning "Dad!".

The old man looked slightly flustered. "And what do you know—in the way of education?" he queried hastily.

"Very little," confessed Hazel truthfully.

"Ah well, I don't expect that your little friend Hazel Warnford will know much more."

"She just knows Gaily More!" thought the irrepressible past of Hazel's mind, but aloud she said, with equal truthfulness:

"I'm sure she doesn't—from what she said."

But inwardly she was asking: why this interest in Hazel Warnford? How indeed did they come to know anything about her at all? She would have loved to follow up the statement that Great-Uncle Herbert had known her parents, but she was afraid to display too great an interest. For a moment there came down on her a feeling almost of sheer terror.

Meeting Gaily More had been exciting, and the mysterious quality about her had appealed to her sense of adventure, but *now*—where was it going to end? She felt as if, like some helpless fly, she had been caught in the strands of a far-reaching web, and with each word that was uttered, that she was being drawn further and further into undreamed-of perplexities.

How could she have known that her fortunes were somehow interwoven with those of Gaily More? And yet it was obvious from Great-Uncle Herbert's words, and from Aunt Mildred's looks, that Hazel Warnford was of just as much interest as, nay of *more* interest almost to them than Gaily More herself. And if they knew about the deception—the interchange of identities—and that they really had Hazel Warnford in their power at the moment——

Involuntarily she shivered, and as if from afar off heard Aunt Mildred's voice saying with surprising kindness:

"You are looking very tired, Gaily"—she had already persuaded them to drop "Abigail". "Why not have a ten minutes' scamper round the house, and then I think you should be off to bed. I'll have some supper taken up to you later on."

Thankfully she accepted the suggestion and made

her escape, but her "scamper round the house" was a mere travesty of an outing.

The October dusk had fallen chill and clammy, and the trees flanking the avenue were dark and forbidding in the half light. Besides—her mind was in a whirl. She felt she could wish for nothing more than the security of her little room to think things out, and very soon she found herself tiptoeing upstairs again. But there was little thinking of things out that night, for the topsy-turvy events of that amazing day now took their revenge. Her head had scarcely touched the pillow before she was fast asleep, to dream wildly that for some reason she was pretending to be Aunt Mildred, and Great-Uncle Herbert was protesting to Gaily More that she couldn't possibly be, since Hazel Warnford had had no supper!

The maid, bringing in supper, decided not to waken the sleeping form.

"Tired out, poor lamb!" she murmured, as she withdrew with the tray, and then slipped back to leave some milk and biscuits in case the "lamb" should waken and feel hungry later on.

It was the one and only real piece of kindness that Hazel had encountered since entering the Grange, and unfortunately she was much too sound asleep to be aware of it!

CHAPTER IV

To School—after all!

Hazel awoke early and devoured the milk and biscuits with relish. The cheerful morning light, filtering through the window, brought a feeling of well-being very different from the depression and panic of the night before. She felt inclined almost to reproach herself for unworthy suspicions, but as recollection came flooding back to her once more her perplexities increased. That there was something very mysterious afoot—something involving Gaily More and, more mysteriously still, involving Hazel Warnford—there could be no manner of doubt.

And then—to think that she was to go to school after all! She almost laughed aloud to think that she had changed places with Gaily to avoid that very happening—and here she was, going the very next day, but going in another girl's name, and to meet another girl masquerading as herself! The situation was really too ridiculous. Another little thought that had been hovering at the back of her mind now presented itself: had Great-Uncle Herbert intended beforehand that she should go to school, or was it only after he learned that Hazel Warnford was at St. Margaret's that he had made the decision? Thinking back to the meaning looks which had passed between him and Aunt Mildred, she could not help feeling that the latter was the case. And if so, of course, it simply made the mystery deeper and deeper.

A long telephone conversation after breakfast, between Aunt Mildred and St. Margaret's, did nothing to dispel this feeling. She heard only snatches of it, but even from these it was fairly obvious that there had been no previous communication with the school. Aunt Mildred, however, appeared well-satisfied as she laid down the receiver.

"The headmistress will see us at once," she announced, and Great-Uncle Herbert beamed complacently.

Hazel's mind was in a turmoil as the car containing Aunt Mildred and herself turned decorously into the drive leading up to the school. St. Margaret's, as they approached it, proved to be quite an impressive pile. It stood on a slight eminence, and was evidently an old mansion converted to its present purposes, but considerably extended and enlarged. A few senior girls were walking about in front of it as their car drew up, but of Gaily More there was no sign. Hazel imagined, and afterwards found this to be correct, that all the playing-fields would lie to the back. None but the most leading lights of the Sixth were ever permitted to appear on the front terraces.

It was not long before they found themselves being ushered through a pleasant entrance hall into an equally pleasant room.

"Yes," the maid informed Aunt Mildred, "Miss Steading is expecting you, and will see you in a few moments."

Feeling very much as if she were in the waiting-room at the dentist's, Hazel did her best to quell her rising panic.

Miss Steading could hardly fail to notice the re-

semblance between her and the new girl of yesterday and was almost bound to remark on it. Therefore—she kept reminding herself—she must be as casual as possible, and above all must remember that she was Gaily More, *not* Hazel Warnford—Gaily More, *not* Hazel Warnford. Mechanically she kept repeating the names over and over, till her already bewildered mind was more bewildered than ever.

“Will you come this way, please?” the maid’s voice broke in, and next moment she was following Aunt Mildred across the passage to a door which the maid held open. .

For the first time Hazel realized that she was in a school, for the room which they entered was lined with books, and Miss Steading rose from a writing-table that was covered with neatly documented, official-looking lists and forms. Besides, even though Hazel had never before seen a headmistress, she felt that she couldn’t possibly have failed to recognize Miss Steading as one. There was a quiet air of being able to take charge of any situation about her, and that, combined with her tall, graceful figure, white hair, and keen, clever eyes, made her at once a force to be reckoned with. Aunt Mildred somehow seemed to pale into insignificance and, for some reason, Hazel’s panic at once departed.

Here, at last, she felt, was somebody dependable; terrifying, in a way, but absolutely sincere and honest. When this awful tangle in which she had involved herself became sorted out, here was somebody who, however angry she might be, would certainly be reasonable and fair.

The Mystery of Gaily More

"How do you do, Miss Fenniston?" she was saying now, in a pleasant voice, while Hazel pricked up her ears. Miss Fenniston! So that was Aunt Mildred's other name. She had forgotten that, and Great-Uncle Herbert must be Fenniston too.

"Gaily!" came Aunt Mildred's voice reprovingly. "Miss Steading is speaking to you."

Hazel blushed and stammered an apology, as she shook hands. The keen, grey eyes looking down at her twinkled good-humouredly.

"Perhaps you weren't too anxious to answer that question," she smiled. "I was asking if you thought you would like school, but probably you would prefer to wait and see."

Hazel's courage returned.

"No," she said, "I think I'm going to like it, though I'm afraid I know practically nothing. Only, I met one of your new pupils in the train yesterday, and she seemed to be just as bad in that way as I was, and I wondered if I might please be put into the same form as she's in?" and she looked up pleadingly into the headmistress's face.

Out of the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of Aunt Mildred, and realized that her request was very much to that lady's mind. She was viewing her supposed niece with the most indulgent of smiles.

Miss Steading, however, was looking puzzled.

"A new pupil," she said, "yesterday?"

"Yes, Hazel Warnford was her name," responded the real Hazel without a tremor.

The effect of this simple announcement on the headmistress was amazing.

“Hazel Warnford—yesterday!” she repeated.
“Are you sure?”

With a return of something like panic, Hazel nodded, but after all of that she could be sure. Hazel Warnford certainly *had* been on the train yesterday.

“This is most extraordinary,” Miss Steading was saying in tones wherein incredulity still struggled. “You see, I had a telegram yesterday morning from her guardian, to say that Hazel would not arrive for another week!”

If a bombshell had exploded under Hazel’s nose she could not have been more surprised.

“But—but—I travelled with her,” she stammered, “and besides, I saw her go out of the station with one of the mistresses—at least, she looked as if she were one of the mistresses,” she emended.

Miss Steading obviously made a strong effort to regain her self-possession.

“This will have to be looked into at once,” she said, with forced calmness. “I must confess that what you say has perturbed me very much and perhaps you will forgive me, Miss Fenniston, if I just take Abigail now along to the Lower Third mistress. I rather think that will be her form. I assure you that she will be quite all right with us, and what you suggest about her going home at week-ends will also be easily arranged, I should think,” and Miss Steading rose with a smile of dismissal.

Aunt Mildred had perforce to take the hint, although Hazel could feel that she was agog with curiosity regarding the non-appearance of her companion of the train. She could well imagine the consternation when

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she announced the news to Great-Uncle Herbert: Hazel Warnford not at the school after all! What else did we send Gaily there for? If they only knew that it *was* Hazel Warnford who was at school, and Gaily More who had disappeared—what then?

She shivered, and at the same time found herself bidding a somewhat perfunctory farewell to Aunt Mildred. She saw the headmistress looking at her a little curiously, and managed to put a trifle more enthusiasm into her leave-taking, but the obvious eagerness of Miss Steading to be rid of them helped matters. Aunt Mildred was escorted to the door, and then she herself was summarily led through into the school quarters and handed over to Miss Ringer, the mistress of the Lower Third.

"This is Abigail More, Miss Ringer," Miss Steading announced in her clear tones, "and I think from the little she has told me that she had better join your girls. You will perhaps go more fully into things with her than I've had time to do, and let me know what you think," and she in turn departed.

Poor Hazel had felt forlorn many times in the last few days, but never more so than now, when she was left standing in front of Miss Ringer's desk, and could feel the inquisitive eyes of some fifteen girls boring into her. Miss Ringer herself for the moment did nothing to help.

She was tall and dark and very stern-looking. Hazel felt that her ignorance was evident at once to her, without her asking a single question. Flushing miserably, she shifted from one foot to the other and wished heartily that the floor would open and swallow her up.

Nothing so drastic happened, however, only quite suddenly the form-mistress smiled, and looked for the moment a different being.

“Abigail More, didn’t Miss Steading say? That’s rather quaint for these modern days. I expect you’ve changed it to something?”

“Why, yes,” said Hazel gratefully, thankful to have this point cleared up so easily. “I’m always called ‘Gaily’.”

There was an instinctive titter from the form, and though Miss Ringer frowned reprovingly, her own eyes smiled.

“You haven’t been looking like it, you know,” she said gently, “‘gay’, I mean. But I don’t know that one ever does, one’s first day at a new school. Let me see—” her eyes swept the form, “yes, Griselda! Abigail will share your dormitory, and your study. Will you take her up now and show her her way about?”

A bright-looking girl, with two thick fair pigtails, jumped up from the middle of the form and next moment was ushering Hazel through the door.

“Oh yes, Miss Ringer. Of course, Miss Ringer,” she said cheerfully, and bustled her charge into the corridor.

Once outside an amazing change came over her. She struck an attitude.

“Angel Abigail! Beloved Abigail! How did you know?”

Hazel stared in bewilderment. “Know what?” she queried.

“How awful geometry is! Oh, Abigail, I know

I'm going to adore you. You've saved my life in the nick of time. The Ringer had just fixed her eagle eye on me when you walked in!"

Hazel began to laugh. So that was it!

"I'm so glad," she began, and then became momentarily stern; "but if you ever call me anything but 'Gaily'—er—Griselda——!"

"And if *you* ever call *me* anything but 'Grizzy', Abigail!" retorted the other.

"We'll both hate each other ever after," she added next moment. "Come along," and she seized Hazel's hand, "I'll show you everything I can, and spin out our tour as long as possible. You don't realize what an escape you're having. Just wait till you've had 'Bells' dinning angles and things into you—and you'll be wishing that you could arrive like this every day!"

She stopped short, and wheeled round to gaze intently at her companion. "Yes," she said at last with a sigh in which relief and satisfaction mingled, "you'll do! We're going to like you in our study, and you know, I believe you'll enjoy being at St. Margaret's! It's quite a decent place, if it weren't for the lessons!"

Hazel laughed again. "I believe I shall," she said, and looking at the merry face in front of her, with its absurdly tip-tilted little nose, she added sincerely, "I'm beginning to feel more at home at St. Margaret's already, than I've done anywhere for a long time."

"That's the spirit!" said Grizzy approvingly. "Now we'd better get on, and inspect your delightful home."

CHAPTER V

New Friends at St. Margaret's

After morning break, during which she was solemnly presented to the other two occupants of the study, Hazel began to wonder why she had ever dreaded the thought of coming to school.

If only, she felt, she could have been there now in her own identity, without this nagging doubt about Gaily More, she would have been happier than she had been for many a day. Grizzy—or Griselda Stormond, to give her her official name—had taken especial pains to make her feel “at home”.

True to her word, she had managed to spin out their tour of inspection till the bell rang, then she bustled Hazel back to the study and arranged on the table an amazing collection of odd biscuits and pieces of cake.

This was hardly done when the door was thrown open.

“Beast!” said the first-comer, helping herself to a biscuit.

“Detestable object!” said the other, shutting the door behind her, and likewise selecting one of the hard pieces of cake.

Hazel, in spite of herself, felt her face flush. Could these abusive words be meant for her—and why?

Grizzy seemed not in the least perturbed. She waved a hand invitingly towards the table.

“Don’t worry about them,” she said placidly; “they weren’t talking to you, of course, but do eat

something. They've got such horrid manners, they'll have them finished if you don't."

"I—I——" Hazel was beginning to stammer, but obediently put out her hand and selected a very soft biscuit. The two newcomers began to talk at once.

"Oh, we're frightfully sorry. You didn't think we meant you—did you? It was that beast Grizzy for sliding out of maths. She *always* manages to escape somehow, and we've both got the wretched proposition to write out for to-morrow."

"Peace, children," put in Grizzy. "You know I was only obliging 'Bells'—I was just pining to hear all about the angle ABC, but I couldn't refuse to show Gaily round—now could I?"

As this appeal was greeted with derisive laughter, she hurried on.

"Anyhow, this is Gaily More—you're not to *dare* to call her Abigail—and Gaily, this is Sheila Brown-Browne—yes, you put an 'e' on to the second one—and she would like us awfully to call her that but of course we couldn't think of such a thing, so she's just 'Brownie'. Yes, shake hands and be friends, for you'll be seeing a lot of each other!"

Laughingly they obeyed, and Hazel, looking into the merry face of the short, rather dumpy, but very good-natured looking "Brownie", wondered how she could ever have been afraid of her.

"That's right," said Grizzy approvingly, "and now shake hands with Amanda. That's her proper name, and she hates it, so of course we like it. She's really Amanda Weir, and if she's good we sometimes call

her 'Weiry' for short, but Amanda's the favourite. Bells adores it—it's a 'Gerundive' you know."

"A—*what?*" gasped Hazel, almost choking over her last piece of biscuit in amazement.

Evidently nothing could have endeared her more to the owner of the name.

"Good girl!" she said, patting her anything but "Wearily" on the back to restore her breath. "I knew you were far too nice to know Latin."

Still very much at sea, but feeling happy at having done the right thing even by accident, Hazel took stock of the last speaker.

She was a clever, distinguished-looking girl, with clear-cut features and a humorous up-turning mouth—in every way, except for the good-nature—a contrast to the rotund Brownie.

In spite of herself she felt her eyes beginning to sparkle, and her spirits to soar as she surveyed the three friendly faces. Gaily More, and all the mysterious events of the previous day, for the moment receded into the background.

"I do think you're being most frightfully kind to me——" she began hesitatingly.

"No speeches!" said Brownie.

"Hear! Hear!" chimed in Amanda in the same breath.

"Have the last biscuit," said Grizzy with exaggerated kindness. "You'll feel better afterwards."

There was nothing for it but to join in the laughter at herself, and, feeling enwrapped in a warm glow of friendliness, she was escorted down to the form-room as the bell summoned them to lessons once again.

The Mystery of Gaily More

Fortunately for Hazel's peace of mind, the rest of the forenoon was devoted to English, and much to her relief she discovered that she was well abreast of the others, if not considerably ahead of them, as regards her own tongue—though even this caused a few moments' anxiety.

Miss Ringer—or Bells, as even she was beginning to think of her—looked at her speculatively.

"Perhaps you ought to be in the Lower Fourth, Gaily," she was beginning, but Hazel broke in.

"Oh no, *please!*" she begged imploringly. "I don't know anything about anything, except this. I'm most frightfully ignorant about all the other subjects. Please don't have me moved!"

Miss Ringer laughed.

"Well, well, we'd better wait and see, at that rate," she agreed, and Hazel sank back with a sigh of relief.

Next moment she felt herself being nudged from the back and, seizing a chance when the form-mistress was not looking, took the slip of paper which Grizzy pushed over to her.

"Stop answering, you silly mutt," she read. "Do you want to be put into the Sixth?"

She was spared the necessity of replying to this, or of carrying out its instructions, by the entry of a maid.

"The headmistress wishes to see Miss Abigail More at once in her study," she announced.

"Gosh—have you got into trouble already?" whispered Grizzy in an awed voice behind her, and even Hazel felt a cold shiver at the summons, but in her case it was the thought of no school prank or misdemeanour

—it was the sudden flash of recollection. Had even already her deception been found out? Had the real Gaily More been traced? Or—with a sick feeling of apprehension she realized that in some ways this was the worst possibility of all—had the headmistress been in touch with her guardian, and had he confirmed the mysterious telegram that Hazel Warnford would not be coming to school for a week?

Actually the first few moments in the Head's study proved this last to be the case.

Miss Steading was still looking worried as she entered.

"Ah, Abigail," she said, "I'm afraid you must have made some mistake yesterday regarding Hazel Warnford. I have had confirmatory word that she is not to be here till next week—and certainly none of the mistresses met her at the station. Do you think——?"

It was so obvious that Miss Steading herself wanted to be assured that everything *was* a mistake that Hazel hesitated, her mind in a turmoil.

"I—I don't know what to think, Miss Steading," she admitted truthfully. "I did meet the other girl in the train, and at the station I saw her being met by a tall lady, and I just took for granted it would be one of the mistresses. Perhaps—" she felt herself flushing with embarrassment, knowing how unlikely her theory was—"perhaps," she repeated, "her guardian had made some unexpected change of plan, and arranged for a friend to meet her—but it all seems very queer."

The headmistress sat drumming with a pen on the writing-table, and at the same time subjected her pupil

to a severe scrutiny, but after a moment, with something like a sigh, she laid down her pen.

"No, I don't think you are," she said, speaking to herself, and as Hazel gazed at her inquiringly, she gave a faint smile.

"I'm thinking aloud. I wondered if in any way you were letting your imagination run away with you, but I'm sure you are not of that type. I dare say your suggestion must be the correct one, for this second telegram," and she pointed to it, "is quite definite. If there had been any mistake regarding the first one—though how there could be baffles me—the second one would certainly have put things right, so I'm afraid there's nothing further to be done."

She smiled at Hazel, though her eyes were still troubled.

"Do you think you are going to like being at St. Margaret's, or have you not had time to form an opinion yet?" she asked kindly.

This time Hazel had no hesitation. "I'm going to love it," she said enthusiastically.

"That's good then. Now perhaps you'd better go back to your form-room, and don't worry over Hazel Warnford any further—we'll see her next week when she comes."

What would she have thought, Hazel wondered, as she closed the door behind her, if she had known that the very girl she had been talking about had been standing before her in the room, while the real Gaily More was—where?

Just for a second she had a violent desire to rush back and tell the headmistress the whole tangled

story, but even as she thought of it her courage failed. Besides—there was Gaily More! Had she not given her her word that she would impersonate her for the week, and now, at the first hint of difficulty, was she going to break her promise?

Slowly she walked back towards the form-room, and as she went, a resolve that had been gradually growing in her mind became a fixed decision. Somehow, she must enlist the aid of her three new friends, and somehow they must try to get to the root of the mystery of Gaily More. Only to them it must be the mystery of Hazel Warnford, for that part—the interchange of identities—she must keep to herself as long as she possibly could. For that Hazel Warnford had been intended to go to St. Margaret's yesterday, she, the real Hazel, could not possibly doubt. Which left the problem—who could the tall stranger have been who had met the masquerading Gaily, and thereby changed the whole course of events? Could there possibly have been, as she had herself suggested, a last-minute change of plan on her guardian's part, and could this stranger have been someone known to him, with whom he had communicated?

But why—why——? He hadn't seemed sufficiently interested in her even to change her plans, and in any case, it all seemed so pointless. If only—and it was as her hand was actually on the handle of the door that she realized this was the nagging fear at the back of her mind—if only she could be sure that Gaily was in no danger, she would not worry, but that was the point. Gaily had been mysterious before, but now, as Hazel Warnford, she was doubly so. Yes, without a

doubt, she must enlist the aid of Grizzy and the others to probe this mystery, not only for the sake of Gaily herself—though that was the main thing—but also to find out why Hazel Warnford should be such an object of interest to so many hitherto unknown people.

As, with an apologetic little smile to Miss Ringer, she was slipping back to her desk, the bell rang for the end of morning school.

“You timed *that* nicely anyhow, Gaily,” said Amanda, joining her. “You must have enjoyed your first morning at school tremendously. I shouldn’t mind it either, if I could put off time as you and Grizzy do.”

Hazel laughed, and by this time both Brownie and Grizzy were with them. The latter assumed a look of mock indignation.

“I like that—I’ve never managed to spin out a visit to the Head that length in my life—not,” she admitted, “that I usually want to. Gaily must be a frightful ‘pet’ already.”

“Or else a very apt pupil—of yours!” put in Brownie mischievously. “You trained her in the right methods as soon as she arrived.”

“I’m much too hungry to argue,” retorted Grizzy, breaking into a run. “Let’s hurry up with dinner, if we possibly can. We must show Gaily the sights. You know, my child, you really must be lucky—you even arrive on our half-holiday.”

Hazel’s spirits soared at the news. Here, then, was her chance right away. More than ever determined to enlist the aid of the friendly trio, she followed them into the dining-room.

Brownie gave a rapturous sniff.

"Luck's still holding, Gaily. It's tomato soup!"

"I'm not very fond of it," Hazel was beginning doubtfully, but Brownie only giggled.

"Then you must be lucky for us," she retorted, "but in any case it doesn't matter whether you like it or not. It's the *MOST AWFUL CRIME*," and her voice put the words into capital letters of exaggerated horror, "to leave anything. You won't, after a bit, anyhow. Starvation soon cures you!"

As Brownie announced all this at the top of her voice, Hazel was thankful to subside into a chair and would gladly have swallowed gallons of the said soup, if only to hide her confusion.

Some of the girls near her smiled in a friendly way, but for the most part everyone seemed too much intent on dinner to bother with the newcomer, and, much to Hazel's relief, this applied to Brownie as well. All the conversation around was concerned with plans for the afternoon—and as the bright October sunshine filtered in through the long windows of the dining-room, Hazel felt her depressed spirits reviving. Surely, with the help of the others, she would find out something about Gaily More—she could not have disappeared out of the station without someone having noticed her, and their job must be to get in touch with that "someone" with the greatest possible speed.

"I beg your pardon," said Brownie politely, pausing in the consumption of her pudding, "did you speak?"

"Er—no—no, of course not. At least, I hope not," murmured Hazel confusedly, and attacked her milk pudding furiously.

Brownie grinned at the others, and at the same time shook her head sadly.

"They're all the same the first day—but she'll get over it. Hurry up and finish, Gaily, and come out. Once you've spent the afternoon with us you'll love us so much you'll forget all about being homesick."

Homesick! Hazel's mind smiled at the word. If it was only that! But she flashed a grateful glance at Brownie just the same, and made haste to obey.

Surely the afternoon would do something towards solving her difficulties?

CHAPTER VI

Tea-party at Kandy's

"And you're certain she came down here?" demanded Grizzy, for about the third time.

"Absolutely certain. We talked all the way in the train—in fact, I wouldn't have known anything about her, for I'd never seen her in my life before, so that in itself is proof positive, isn't it?"

Grizzy nodded solemnly, but it was Amanda who spoke.

"And yet the Head's had two telegrams stating that she won't be for another week? Do you think she's satisfied about it?"

Hazel shook her head.

"No, I'm sure she's not, any more than I am, but I think she feels she can't very well do anything, in face of her guardian's message. But that's just why

I feel *we* must, for I'm certain there's something wrong. Gai—," she checked herself just in time—"Hazel Warnford expected to be going straight to school, and whatever change there was in her plans must have been made known to her only at the station."

"What sort of a girl was she—this Hazel Warnford?" asked Brownie.

Hazel almost had to repress a smile.

"Oh—just a—an ordinary sort of girl," she responded vaguely. "She and I were really quite alike—we began laughing as soon as we saw each other's face, and then, of course, after that we talked."

"Well, if she's like you, she'll do," said Grizzy, amiably tugging one of Hazel's pigtails, "but all the same it's frightfully vague, and I don't see very well how we can do anything."

"We won't do it here, that's certain," said Amanda, springing to her feet. "Come along, Gaily. We'll take you down to inspect the village, and perhaps we'll get some inspiration on the way."

"I just feel all thrilled with your story, Gaily," said Brownie, some five minutes later, as they swung down the hill leading towards Lowgreen, the nearest little village to St. Margaret's. "I'm feeling quite excited, although we always come here on a half-holiday, as if something—something really adventurous were going to happen."

"And nothing more adventurous probably will happen than our usual visit to Kandy's—that is, if you've enough money even for that," teased Grizzy.

Brownie's face fell, and she shook the pockets of her blue reefer coat hopelessly.

"I don't hear anything rattling—do you?" she inquired, giving the coat another vigorous shake. "I thought I'd made a tremendous discovery when I put it on—half a crown at least, but it was only one of the buttons I'd put in the pocket, and I'll be getting a row from Matron for not having it sewn on."

"I've got a threepenny piece with a hole in it," said Amanda brightly, "and have you still got your 'lucky penny' Grizzy?"

"Yes, but I daren't spend it, in case of bad luck! So that means we've threepence and a button; we'll not go very far on that."

Hazel had been dreading this. Thoughtlessly, in the exchange of coats with Gaily More, she had left her purse in one of the pockets, and unfortunately had found none in Gaily's to make up for it.

"I can't help," she announced sadly, "my aunt doesn't seem to have thought about pocket-money, and I forgot to ask for any."

"Last hope gone," said Brownie. "Never mind, we can always buy threepennyworth of toffees at Kandy's, and then we'll have plenty of time to moon around and see things. Here we are, Gaily, this is the great Kandy's."

Hazel blinked. From the description, she had been expecting an ordinary modern tearoom, but here was a typical little village shop, with a narrow door which sounded a bell as one entered. The rounded window was made up of tiny panes of glass, and was filled inside with a strange medley of sweets, cakes, and groceries in general.

"Rather a shock?" queried Amanda in a laughing

whisper, as to the accompaniment of the tinkling bell they pushed their way in.

"It's really much nicer inside," she added reassuringly, but already Hazel had grasped that, for, from the threshold, a wide room at the back was revealed, containing a number of little tables all covered surprisingly with different-coloured cloths, and presenting an appearance of astonishing daintiness. There was a great deal of chattering going on, for many of the St. Margaret's girls had already arrived, but it was not their merry greetings, as the four appeared in the doorway, that made Hazel suddenly stand rooted to the spot, with her eyes almost popping out of her head.

"Seen a ghost?" inquired Grizzy cheerfully.

She pulled herself together with an effort.

"Do you see that girl?" she gasped—there was no need to indicate which girl she meant, for she sat at a table facing them, with a pleased smile of recognition, while at the other side of the table sat a tall lady whom Hazel also instinctively recognized.

"It's Gai—Hazel Warnford," she stammered, once again almost blurting out the wrong name. "I wonder what she's doing here."

There was no need to wonder long, for impetuously Gaily More had risen and was beckoning them forward.

"Gaily!" she exclaimed in a voice of pleased surprise, "just think of meeting you again so soon. I was telling Mrs. Archer about coming down with you in the train," but, as she spoke, her hand pressed Hazel's feverishly with—was it a warning clasp? Something in Hazel's being sensed that it was, but there was no time for thought—all of them were plunged into a

round of introductions and in no time, at the real Gaily's invitation, were joining her at afternoon tea.

As the first babel of meeting died down, Hazel took stock of Gaily's companion, but had to turn her eyes aside hurriedly as she realized that she too was being subjected to the same process—not before she had seen, however, what a very surprising-looking person she was.

Tall, dark, middle-aged, she yet had a look of compelling energy about her; there was a smouldering, concentrated keenness in the black, close-set eyes, and was it cold cruelty in the finely-shaped nose, and the thin straight lips? Yet, when she spoke, her voice was charming, and actually it was she who made the tea-party “go”—for “go” it did.

“Oh, of course you must celebrate this chance meeting,” she said laughingly, in answer to their feeble protests that they hadn't intended to have tea. “Hazel and I are only too delighted to have this opportunity of entertaining you——”

“That,” as Brownie remarked afterwards, “was where I heaved a sigh of relief, for I couldn't help wondering what would happen if we had to pay up ourselves!”

“Me too,” said Grizzy ungrammatically, “but she gave us a marvellous tea.”

There was no doubt about that. Everything that previous visits to Kandy's had allowed them to sample at very modest and widely-spaced intervals had, that afternoon, been lavished upon them. Only the real Hazel and the real Gaily had failed to do the feast full justice, for across the table their eyes tried to com-

municate with each other—in vain, for the mysterious Mrs. Archer's eyes seemed always to be intercepting every glance.

"And are you really coming to St. Margaret's next week, Hazel?" demanded Grizzly. "Gaily was quite surprised when she found you weren't already there."

It was Mrs. Archer who answered.

"Oh yes, I think you'll have Hazel with you next week. Her guardian at the last moment thought she'd be the better for a little holiday with me first, before going to school."

Hazel's heart beat a shade more quickly as she heard what she could not help being sure was a tissue of falsehoods.

A little holiday first, when she had been doing nothing for ages! No! Decidedly there was something very strange not only about Mrs. Archer, but about her guardian too. She wished the tea-party would come to an end so that she could talk things over with the others.

It did—with surprising suddenness.

Mrs. Archer all at once consulted her watch, and a look almost of alarm appeared on her face.

"I'm sorry, girls, but I'm afraid Hazel and I will have to go. Don't hurry, for I'll arrange matters with the waitress as I go out. Come along, Hazel, we're rather late already!" And in a moment they were gone.

In a ferment, Hazel wondered if she could make some excuse to dash after them. It was too awful to have been sitting opposite the one girl she had been dying to discover—to have been sitting opposite her all that time, and now at the end of it to be no wiser

than she had been before. She had no idea where she was staying, and above all *why* she was staying, when by every right she ought already to be at St. Margaret's.

Her utter misery must have been written plainly on her face for Amanda began to laugh softly.

"I say, have you indigestion? It must be lack of practice at Kandy's, for you didn't eat a quarter of what we've all tucked away."

Hazel tried to smile, but before she could say anything the little waitress approached the table.

"Is one of you called Gaily More?" she inquired hesitatingly. "I didn't quite catch the name, so maybe it's just something like that!"

"No, it isn't—it is—I am," began Hazel incoherently amid the giggles of the others.

"She means she's Gaily More," explained Amanda, "but the ten cream cakes that she's eaten have been rather much for her!"

"You *are* Gaily More?" the waitress inquired again, ignoring Amanda's sally. "Well, the young lady that went out just now came dashing back—in a terrible fluster she was—and simply pushed this into my hand and said I was to give it to you. A fair turn she gave me, I can tell you, with her excitement and all!"

"But what *did* she give you?" demanded Hazel, trying to keep her own voice steady.

"You may well ask, Miss, for that was all it was—a bit of cardboard, if you please!" and to the wondering girl she handed over what was obviously a piece torn from a box such as confectioners use for packing their cakes.

In a flash, with her mind's eye, Hazel saw the box

and parcels which had been resting on an empty chair beside Gaily More. Evidently they had been shopping before entering the tearoom, and somehow, and somewhere on this scrap of board, there would be—there *must* be—some message, some hint for her.

She slipped it with pretended casualness into her pocket, and smiled at the waitress.

"It's just her idea of a joke," she said, laughing; "she's always doing silly things like that——"

"Do you like them with nuts—or just plain, Gaily?" broke in Amanda's voice plaintively from the doorway. "You'd think it was an unimportant matter to be buying toffees, you're showing so little interest. You'd better remember it's all we'll have to keep us from starving till next half-holiday!"

Laughingly Hazel joined her, and in a few moments more they had left the shop and were slowly ascending the hill which led back to school.

"But is there nothing at all on it, Gaily?" Grizzly was demanding in perplexed tones.

Hazel shook her head.

"I don't want to take it out here," she answered, "just in case anybody passes, or is watching, but it looked to me to be absolutely blank. When we get back to the study, we'll examine it properly. It simply must mean *something*. She'd never go to all that trouble and fuss just to give me a meaningless bit of cardboard. Besides—I know by the way she clutched my hand, she was warning me to be careful. If only I knew——" and she hesitated.

"What to be careful about!" completed Amanda for her. "Cheer up, old girl. Don't look so down-

hearted. We'll make something out of the mysterious message—see if we don't. Anyhow, I'll have the arm-chair to think it out!" and she raced ahead.

"Oh no, you don't!" gasped Brownie and Grizzy, darting after her in a mad rush. "Come on, Gaily. Don't let her have it—she simply wallowed in it last half, by taking us by surprise like this."

Without having the slightest idea what it was all about Hazel joined in the wild career, but the run did her good.

Panting and breathless by the end of it, she had only one thought in her head:

Why are schools always built on hills?

But even that problem faded out in the indignant scrimmage to dispossess Amanda of the study's solitary arm-chair.

In vain, of course.

"I solemnly bag this chair;
Bad luck to any who dare
To put me off from there!"

Amanda chanted her doggerel in warning tones, and laughingly they fell back.

"Now you may chew the 'toffee of peace'," she pronounced graciously, producing the bag, "and if you will just be seated—in so far as my humble dwelling will allow——".

"Grr-r-r!" murmured Brownie as well as a very nutty caramel permitted.

"I shall have pleasure in aiding my friend Gaily towards an—er—elucidation of her perplexities," she finished, blandly ignoring the interruption.

"She cribbed that from the Ringer. She used it in form yesterday," explained Grizzy, with a withering look down her nose. "But yes, what about that card-board, Gaily? Take it out, and we'll soon tell you all about it."

"I only hope you can," responded Hazel, returning with a jolt to the mystery. "Here it is, but, oh, I say, there *is* something on it after all—the light caught it just now; she must have scratched it with her nail. Look!"

CHAPTER VII

Great-Uncle Herbert's Tuck-box

"Are you *sure* that's all that's on it?" said Brownie plaintively.

Hazel nodded.

"Just 'Help'," she repeated, "but you can look again yourself, and see if you can get anything further."

Once more they collected round the scrap of paste-board. Once more it was held up at all angles, and scrutinized under what Grizzy insisted was a "*very* powerful magnifying glass, even if it did cost just sixpence at Woolford's", but all to no avail. Even the "Help" was none too plain.

"But of course it wouldn't be," Amanda put in, in answer to a doubtful comment from Brownie, and Hazel agreed.

"She hadn't time. In fact, it was amazing, considering how that Mrs. Archer—if that's her real name—

kept her eyes on us, that she even managed to leave this."

"Yes, but it's so little use," objected Grizzy ungratefully.

"Um'm'm, I don't know about that." Amanda's clever face was puckered with seriousness. "It let Gaily know"—and she looked across at Hazel—"what she had only suspected before—that there was something far wrong. And now she's counting on her——"

"—and on us," put in Brownie staunchly.

"Well 'us' of course," conceded Amanda. "Anyhow, she's counting on assistance, and—and——"

"We're jolly well going to see that she gets it," concluded Grizzy brightly. "Come on, Gaily, cheer up! You're looking about as happy as when you first arrived to-day."

In spite of her inner feeling of helplessness, Hazel laughed.

"It's so—so terribly worrying," she said apologetically. "I was sure from the beginning there was something wrong, and now that I know there is, it seems worse than ever—and I simply don't know what we can do."

"Wait till the great brains start thinking," the irrepressible Grizzy was beginning, when a maid appeared at the door.

"For Miss Abigail More," she announced, and handed in a large parcel.

"It—it must be a mistake——" Hazel stammered, as they collected round this latest addition to the mystery.

"Rubbish—look at the address," and Amanda pointed to the label. "Nothing could be plainer than 'Miss Abigail More, St. Margaret's'—now, could it?"

"Shall I cut the strings, Gaily?" begged Brownie, whose eyes were dancing with curiosity and excitement.

Hazel managed to pull her reeling wits together, and to summon up a laugh.

"Of course, please do. I'm simply dying to see what's inside too!"

Breathlessly Sheila cut and tore apart the wrappings, while the others hung over her, too excited to speak.

"Oh, Gaily!" Brownie's voice was a squeak of joyous amazement. "It's a tuck-box—the most gorgeous tuck-box. What a perfectly marvellous cake!" And with flushed face, and with hands trembling with eagerness, she drew it out, following it up with jam, chocolate biscuits, and a box of sweets. Last, but not least, an envelope containing a brief note and two half-crowns!

"Jehoshaphat!" exclaimed Grizzy. "You didn't tell us you were a millionairess, Gaily."

"No wonder we thought we'd like you!" supplemented Amanda.

"I *knew* something jolly was going to happen—I just *couldn't* be depressed when you were all looking so 'mopey' a minute or two ago," and Brownie proceeded to take the cake for a dance round the table.

"But—but—but—" Hazel went stammering on, "who can have sent it? I don't know anybody."

"Read the note, stupid!" laughed Amanda; "it'll tell you."

To the others, the note seemed perfectly normal,

but to Hazel it seemed just a step farther into the web of mystery which already entangled her. Great-Uncle Herbert wasn't doing this without some motive.

"Dear Gaily," she read, "your Aunt Mildred and I sent you off to school without those two essentials of a new term—tuck and pocket-money. However, better late, I suppose, than never. We are looking forward to receiving a letter from you—we understand you are allowed to write home on Wednesday evenings—and to hear how you are settling down. Has there been any further news of your little friend, Hazel Warnford? You must tell Aunt Mildred when you write—and, of course, you will give us all the news when you come home on Saturday.

"Best wishes from your Aunt and myself,

"Your affectionate,

"Great-Uncle Herbert."

The last words kept boring themselves into Hazel's mind, as she listened to the others' gleeful comments:

"What a dear old soul he must be!"

"Wish my Great-Uncle would have nice inspirations like that!"

"Why didn't you tell us, Gaily, he was such a darling?" This last came reproachfully from Brownie.

"Didn't—er—what?" repeated Hazel, coming back to herself with a jerk. "Oh yes, didn't tell you that Great-Uncle Herbert was such a darling? Well, you see, I didn't know myself till now."

"And you know he *isn't*," put in her own mind irrepressibly. "You know very well the whole reason

for this is to make sure you'll write and tell them about Hazel Warnford. What on earth can they be wanting to know about her for? And what on earth would happen if they knew I wasn't me but her?"

With an effort she pulled herself back to the demands of the moment.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she exclaimed contritely, as she became aware of the polite, but expectant looks of the others.

"Do sample the 'goodies'—that is if there's time before prep."

But Amanda shook her head sadly.

"There isn't—there's the wretched tintinnabulation already, but it'll be gorgeous to think of coming back to all this, won't it?" and she waved an expressive hand towards the parcel, before leading the way into the corridor.

Feeling slightly dazed, Hazel followed.

"What's 'tin—tin—' you know, what Amanda said just now?" she asked. "Does it just mean the bell?"

"That's the stuff!" approved Brownie. "Don't let Amanda put it over on you—besides, she cribbed 'tintinnabulation' out of the poem we've been learning. It's the ghastliest poem for the Ringer to have given us, anyhow. It's all about 'Bells' and nobody can ever say it without giggling. I'm sure she did it on purpose. I've had to write it out three times already for laughing in the middle!"

Prep was brief for, as Great-Uncle Herbert's letter had cunningly reminded her, time was allowed at the end of it for the weekly letter home.

Most of the girls around her were soon scribbling vigorously, while Hazel struggled to compose a few lines which should seem natural. The first part was easy:

“ Dear Aunt Mildred,

“ It was very good of you and Great-Uncle Herbert to send me such a lovely tuck-box, and also the five shillings. The three girls with whom I am sharing a study were just as excited as I was, when the mysterious parcel arrived, and we are all looking forward tremendously to sampling the contents——” but there she stuck.

Should she say anything about the meeting that afternoon with Gaily More and Mrs. Archer, or should she keep that little bit of information to herself meantime, and merely remark that Hazel hadn't yet appeared and, according to another telegram to Miss Steading, definitely wasn't coming to school for at least a week?

Miss Ringer's voice broke warningly in on her thoughts.

“ You will have to finish now, girls. The supper bell will be going in a few moments.”

Hurriedly Hazel decided on the latter course, and finished off her brief note. If necessary, Gaily's presence in the district could be disclosed when she returned to the Grange on Saturday. A shiver of apprehension ran through her at the thought, but was immediately swallowed up by a stupendous yawn. All at once she realized that the excitements of the day had

made her more tired than she had ever felt in her life before. Perhaps, later on, she would be sorry, but for that night at least she was thankful that there was no interval between prep and supper. It was a case of trooping straight to the dining-room where milk and biscuits awaited them, and thereafter prayers and bed.

"Thank goodness it's you who have come, Gaily," said Amanda, as they reached the dormitory, "and not somebody awful. We've just been scared ever since term began, in case Bells would dump somebody from the other dorms on to us—for we've had two spare beds, and the other rooms are full."

"Which just shows," put in Grizzy, laughingly, from her corner.

"Shows what?" queried Sheila in muffled tones, as she struggled out of her gym blouse.

"What a good prophet I am, of course. You remember, I said Bells would never spoil our select company with any humdrum ordinary being, and here we are, you see, with Gaily—and Great-Uncles and Great-Aunts showering wealth and tuck-boxes upon her!"

Hazel began a laugh which ended in a yawn.

"Oh, I'm so sorry—I wish I could say all the nice polite things back again, but I'm so sleepy I can't think of one—except that I'm looking forward terribly to to-morrow to seeing you all enjoying that tuck-box."

"Not half so much as we are," put in the irrepressible Grizzy, "and I say, Gaily——"

But what she was going to say was doomed to wait

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for that night at any rate, for Miss Ringer's stern voice broke in:

"No more talking now. Are you all ready? Good night, girls." And she switched off the light to the accompaniment of "Good night, Miss Ringer!" from four sleepy voices.

Grizzy attempted to revive conversation in a whisper, but to Hazel's relief, Sheila and Amanda answered only with snores, and, taking her cue from them, she did likewise.

With a disgusted snort Grizzy also settled down, muttering to herself once more, in her role of prophet, "And I'm certain that the other spare bed is being kept for that queer girl, Hazel Warnford, that Gaily's so 'het up' about. Not queer-looking, of course. I must say she seemed quite decent—frightfully like Gaily herself. I wonder if—I wonder—I——" and then she too, still wondering, in her turn, fell asleep.

CHAPTER VIII

Griselda goes to the Grange

"Oh dear!" sighed Hazel, "I never thought school would be so exhausting. When do we have another half-holiday?"

There were amused chuckles from the other occupants of Study 6.

"Of course," said Brownie, "if you will kill yourself working the way you've been doing, answering

every question, you're bound to feel exhausted. I've nearly had brain-fever trying to kick you under the desk, to warn you."

"So that's where you keep your brains, Brownie?" put in Amanda, with mock politeness. "I heard Bells asking you to-day. I must tell her they're in your feet, and that she's not to tramp on your toes."

"Peace, children!" interposed Grizzly, seeing Brownie about to make some scathing retort. "But seriously, Gaily, the Ringer will give you no rest, if you humour her like that. Besides, she'll be setting you on to improve us soon, and you'll be being held up as an example. You mustn't do it. Really, you mustn't!"

Hazel laughed.

"I wish, if I'm so clever—which, of course, I amn't—that I could think out some plan about Hazel Warnford. Here we are with a whole day past, and we don't know even where that Mrs. Archer stays—far less how we're going to help Hazel."

"Oh, but we do, and we can," put in Amanda complacently. "I've just been gasping for a chance to tell you. When Bells sent me a message to Miss Steading to-day I had my particular brain-wave, for on my way back, as I was passing the hall telephone, I noticed the Directory hanging beside it and—well—that was that!"

"You mean you looked up Mrs. Archer in it?" asked Grizzly, with a puzzled frown; "but how could you be sure you had the right one? There are always dozens of everybody's name."

Amanda shook her head.

"That's just the point. There aren't—dozens of 'Mrs. Archers', I mean. There's only the one in this district, so she's almost certain to be ours."

Hazel leant forward eagerly. "And where *does* she stay? Do you know the house?"

Amanda grinned.

"I nearly didn't, for Miss Steading came out just as I discovered it, and I had to drop the Directory and bolt. I was sure she had seen me, and I had cold shivers down my back, expecting 'Amanda, were you touching the 'phone?' but—wow!" she broke off to nurse her foot, and to glare indignantly at Brownie. "What was that for?"

"Good for you, Brownie!" applauded Grizzy. "Perhaps she'll come to the point now. Gaily's eyes are nearly popping out of her head with excitement. Do go on, Amanda."

"Well, all I can say is that Brownie's 'brains' have plenty of weight, even if they've no breadth or thickness. Yes—all right, I'm just going to tell you." Amanda gasped in mock terror, as Brownie's foot edged again threateningly near. "She lives at that house 'Clevedon'—you know, we often used to pass it last year."

"Clevedon," repeated Hazel, for the name conveyed nothing to her, and then, struck by a sudden thought, she added, "Is it near the Grange where my—my people stay?"

Grizzy nodded excitedly, not appearing to notice her hesitation.

"Why, yes, it's quite near it; in fact"—she looked at the others with wrinkled brows—"aren't

the grounds adjoining each other? I think they are."

"That's right," supplemented Brownie and Amanda eagerly, and the latter added laughingly, "Now you know how you can spend your week-end, Gaily—talking over the garden wall to the mysterious Hazel, and finding out all the whys and wherefores of her peculiar behaviour. I wonder if she knew anything about your 'nearness' when she left that 'Help' message?"

"Goodness knows!" Hazel sighed despondently and, as a recollection of the wooded approach to the Grange flashed across her mind's eye, she gave a hopeless little shudder. It would be a case of looking for a needle in a haystack to try to make contact with Gaily from there.

Grizzy seemed to sense her feelings.

"Clevedon's not nearly so 'unapproachable' as the Grange," she assured her. "You can see the house quite easily from the road, and it'll be quite an advantage having the trees on your side. You'll be able to slip up, without being noticed, and 'confab' to your heart's content!"

"I wish we could go home with you on Saturday," put in Brownie, her round face beaming even at the imaginary prospect. "It would be simply thrilling to make up a rescue party—whatever we'd be rescuing her from!"

"I wish you could have come," agreed Hazel fervently, and with more sincerity than the others realized, "but nothing was said about inviting a friend, so I can hardly ask you this week-end. I'll just have to do the

best I can myself, and report all my discoveries—if I have any to report, that is—when I come back on Sunday night.”

But events, as things turned out, were to prove this wrong. When the car arrived, according to arrangement, after school lunch on Saturday, the chauffeur brought a note suggesting that Gaily might like to bring a friend with her for her short visit home.

“Oh *me*, Gaily!” pleaded Grizzy, almost dancing with excitement. “I’m your oldest and dearest friend in this establishment, and you’ve no idea what a marvellous sleuth I can be. We’ll have the Hazel mystery solved in no time!”

“Of all the conceited——” stuttered Brownie, for once at a loss for words, but Amanda laughingly broke in:

“We’d better retire gracefully, Brownie, just to show that some of us know how to be polite. Anyhow,” she added in a stage whisper, “perhaps we’ll surprise them by a little sleuthing on our own.”

The other two, however, were already racing off to seek Miss Steading’s permission, and this last remark went unregarded.

“Oh, Gaily, I’m simply thrilled,” beamed Griselda some ten minutes later, as the car sped smoothly along towards the Grange.

“Look,” she exclaimed suddenly, “there’s Clevedon, and I say, isn’t that your Hazel Warnford just going in at the door? Bother! You’re too late—the door has shut on her.”

Hazel devoured the scene with her eyes as their car swept past. It was indeed a pleasant-looking house

—standing on raised ground, and fronted by a well-kept lawn, alongside of which ran a broad sweep of drive leading to the front door.

“It’s terribly different from here, isn’t it?” she remarked as they turned into the thickly wooded avenue now so familiar—familiar, but not any more friendly, for the same chilling feeling of dread descended on her as they drove up the steep approach, as when she had first accompanied Aunt Mildred from the station.

Grizzy obviously was affected by no such feelings. She wriggled from one side to the other, trying to peer through the trees on either side, but broke off to emit a delighted “Oh!” as they suddenly emerged once more into the open, and gained a clear view of the beautiful old house. For the moment its beauty overwhelmed Hazel too, almost rebuking her for her doubts and suspicious dreads; but, as on her first sight, they swept down on her with redoubled force for, at the same high window, the pale anxious face of her previous visit appeared. In a moment it was gone, as if compelling hands had drawn its owner back, but in that second all Hazel’s terrors were renewed. She had forgotten about that mysterious imprisoned girl—the bustle and novelty and excitement of school had completely driven all recollection of her from her mind—but somehow this time, she affirmed to herself grimly, she would, she *must*, try to get into touch with her.

Griselda had noticed nothing but was already jumping out of the car, as the sombre-looking chauffeur held open the door, and slowly Hazel followed. It was all right for Grizzy, to whom this was a delightful

break from school, but how different for her! Would all this mystery and plotting and planning ever be cleared up? She was almost beginning to forget which of the two she really was—her own self, Hazel Warnford—and, if so, what mystery could there possibly be about *her*?—or Gaily More—and again, what was the mystery in her case?

With her head in a whirl, she found herself being greeted affably by Great-Uncle Herbert and informed that Aunt Mildred was in town, but would be home probably in time for tea. Perhaps she and Griselda, who by this time had been introduced, would manage to amuse themselves till then?

Nothing could have pleased them better. Almost lightheartedly Hazel took Grizzy upstairs, Miriam, the maid who followed with their small cases, informing them that the other young lady was to have the room next door to Miss Abigail's.

"Oh, lovely!" exclaimed that worthy as they arrived. "I'll be able to tap through messages to you, Gaily, if I wake up during the night."

"Come in here for a moment," invited Hazel, as Miriam smilingly withdrew, and Grizzy followed her into her room.

"Listen," she breathed in a whisper, cutting short her exclamations of approval. "Yes, it is rather a topping room, isn't it, but don't bother about that just now. I don't know how I came to forget about this. You didn't notice a face at one of the turret windows as we came up just now, did you?"

The other's bewildered shake of the head was answer enough.

"No, I didn't think you did. Well, the same thing happened when I arrived here a week ago, but it was only when I saw it again to-day that I remembered."

"But *what*, Gaily, saw *what*?" asked Grizzy plaintively.

"A face," said Hazel, "a face that was pulled back each time, before I could see it properly; and that wasn't all——" and in a few words she related the scraps of conversation she had overheard that first night, when she had lost her bearings on the way down to tea. .

"I'm certain," she concluded impressively, "that somebody's being kept a prisoner on that top flat. Yes, I know it sounds ridiculous," as Grizzy gave an incredulous snort, "but I'm pretty sure I'm right, and I can't help thinking, too, that whoever it is, is wanting to see me, to get in touch with me, perhaps to warn me, and"—she paused impressively—"what *we've* got to do this week-end is to try to find out who it is!"

Grizzy's face lit up with impish delight.

"This is better and better," she laughed. "Won't Weiry and Brownie be frightfully sick when I tell them this too? Oh, Gaily, don't take it so seriously. Come on, let's go sleuthing now; there must be ages of time yet before tea. We'll polish this mystery off first, and deal with Hazel Warnford as the next instalment. Lead the way, Sherlock, I'll follow."

In spite of her own trepidation, Hazel couldn't help responding to the other's merry attitude, and cautiously she opened the door and looked out. Perhaps after all, with Aunt Mildred away, the present was as good a time as any.

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"All clear," she remarked unnecessarily, for Grizzy was already dancing along noiselessly beside her.

"It's up this stair that her room is," she whispered, when a moment or two's walking brought them to the scene of those terrified few moments of a week ago, and as they paused irresolutely, in her mind's ear she heard again the desolate groan that had first attracted her attention.

She was hard put to it to stifle a shriek of terror this time, too, and Grizzy beside her, affected by her nervousness, clutched her hand feverishly, as suddenly the door at the top of the dark stair opened, and a voice, a harsh voice, descended to them.

"I'll be back in ten minutes now—so none of your worriting." And then, to their ears, came the sound of a key being turned in a lock, followed by heavy footsteps descending the stair.

"Quick, into this alcove!" and Hazel drew Grizzy back into a little recess she had noticed in her previous journey along that way.

It was fortunate that a hiding-place so near presented itself, for there was no time to make back to their rooms. Trembling with excitement they crouched back in the shadow, painfully aware of how slight was the concealment, if anyone should chance to look in their direction.

The footsteps reached the foot of the stairs, and the grip of Grizzy's hand became more intense; they scarcely dared to breathe.

What if whoever-it-was suspected their presence, should peer in, should find them crouching there? What if——?

But the few seconds of agonized conjecture ended in silent gasps of relief. Without hesitation the owner of the footsteps had turned off to the right, in the opposite direction from where they were hiding, and next moment brought the sound of her steps descending to the lower flat.

There was no time to lose.

“Quick!” gasped Hazel, but Grizzy needed no encouragement, and together they tiptoed swiftly up the narrow stairway to the landing.

It was—even on the landing—not particularly clear, for the short October afternoon was drawing in, and here, in this narrow turreted wing, the chief illumination came from a mere thin slit of a window fitted with coloured glass.

Even so, there was no doubt as to the door—the direction of the voice had made it plain that it was the first on the right.

With hands trembling with eagerness, Hazel turned the handle—to no avail. The door remained obstinately shut.

A wave of disappointment swept over her as automatically she felt for the keyhole, only to find it empty.

“Of course,” she whispered, “she locked the door, and has taken away the key.”

Grizzy, however, was not to be daunted. Before the other could stop her, she was tapping quietly but urgently on the door, and from inside there came a rustle—a movement—surely a queer excited gasp?

Yes—for next moment a trembling voice came filtering through.

“Who is it?” and then without waiting for a reply,

“Is it you, Gaily—really Gaily at last?” And though the sound was so feeble as almost to be imperceptible, yet both the listening girls felt that the words ended with almost a sob of relief.

Feeling, not for the first time, a miserable sickness of heart at the deception in which she had involved herself, Hazel whispered back:

“Yes, it’s Gaily. Who are you? Why are you kept locked up like this? Tell us—there are two of us here—myself and Grizzy my friend from school—how can we help you?”

To their amazement the feeble voice behind the locked door vouchsafed no answer but a laugh.

In the half darkness the two girls clutched each other indignantly, but the speaker within the room seemed to sense their annoyance, for her words came quickly.

“Forgive me,” she whispered, “but it’s not you who must try to help me, it’s the other way round. I’ve been longing for this, but now you dare not wait, for Hannah will be back at any moment. Quick, I’ll push this note I’ve had written in the hope that you would come—it will explain a little, and we must—we *must* see each other. . . .” The whisper had almost an hysterical note in it, and at the same time there was the sound of struggling, labouring movement towards the door.

The figure within was now obviously just separated from them by the intervening wood, and the two girls without could hear her fumbling movements as she strove to push through the letter she had mentioned.

Would it never come?

Both of them were by this time down on hands and knees, watching for the first glint beneath the dark wood, but it was plainly no easy matter. The old, well-seasoned timber seemed to have left practically no space below.

Then suddenly the sound of returning footsteps from the lower flat reached their ears.

"Oh, quick!" they gasped simultaneously, "she's coming back!"

"Hannah?" breathed the voice behind the door, and the wealth of terror even in the whisper was distressing to hear, but at the self-same moment a corner of paper showed itself beneath the tight-fitting frame.

Hazel grasped it and pulled—it tore away in the middle, but already the steps were now commencing the last flight, and their escape that way was impossible.

"The room opposite!" came the urgent whisper within. "Oh, quick! If Hannah finds you here it's all up!"

They needed no second injunction. Almost flat on their faces they slid across to the opposite door. The footsteps, for some reason, had paused at the foot of the last flight of stairs, giving them a moment's grace. In a blind terror Hazel found herself wondering if Hannah could possibly have heard, could possibly be suspecting their presence, but even as she wondered, the steps began to ascend more quickly, and at the same moment Grizzy turned the handle—oh, thank goodness, this one not only turned, but opened!—and noiselessly she half pushed, half dragged Hazel into safety, silently thrusting to the door.

With their shaking forms leaning against it—lean-

ing with all their weight, they realized, when once the tension was past, as though the dreaded Hannah might immediately stride towards their hiding-place—they heard the key being inserted in the lock opposite, and the harsh voice exclaiming: “Just ten minutes to the second!” then, with a sudden change to mingled anger and consternation: “*What* in the name of conscience have you been a-doing with yourself? Are you ill, then?”

But they waited to hear no more. Faint themselves with relief and terror, they slipped out from their sanctuary and down the stairs—scarcely bothering to tip-toe, so loud now was the strident voice in that other closed room—and only just in time.

From below came Aunt Mildred’s now familiar voice calling:

“Are you there, girls? Come downstairs and let me see you. It’s almost time for tea.”

CHAPTER IX

Alarm by Night

“We’ve really got most of it,” commented Hazel, turning over in her hands the torn letter which they had pulled with such difficulty from under the mysterious door.

“Yes,” she went on, “it’s only a corner of the envelope that’s been lost, but I—I just can’t understand it. It makes sense, and yet it doesn’t make sense. You know what I mean?”

But Grizzy shook her head plaintively. "You haven't even told me what's in it," she protested, "so how could I?"

Hazel roused herself.

"Look," she said, and handed the paper over. "Read it out," she added, "to see if it will convey anything to me this time, for I just haven't been able to take it in."

"'Dearest Gaily,'" complied Grizzy, and even she was so engrossed in the mysterious words before her that her voice held nothing of its usual laughter. "'You will scarcely remember me, indeed, I don't think you can possibly remember me at all, you were so tiny when our parents died—but I am your sister, Margaret, and I have lived here all my life with Aunt Mildred and Great-Uncle Herbert. They have been kind to me in some ways for they know that I cannot live much longer, but they keep me practically a prisoner with that dreadful Hannah to look after me; although I knew you were coming at last, I felt sure, and rightly, that they would not let me speak to you—that is why I wrote this letter, to have it in readiness if chance brought you anywhere near me. All I was allowed to do for you, was to choose your room—did you like it? I tried to have it made bright and homely so that you would not feel frightened, as I so often have done, in this grim house——'"

"So *that* explains it!" interpolated Hazel, "*that's* why Aunt Mildred looked so queer when I said it felt different."

Grizzy, however, was too much interested in what followed to notice the interruption.

“‘But I dare not linger,’” she went on, “‘for Hannah may be back. I can write only when she is out. Dearest Gaily, be on your guard. Aunt Mildred and Great-Uncle Herbert are plotting something dishonest—I am sure of it—and you are to be made use of in some way. That is why you have been brought home. I have not been downstairs for about a fortnight now, but before that Hannah always helped me down for tea, and I think Aunt and Uncle grew careless, for they talked almost freely in front of me—or perhaps they thought I didn’t matter.’ Poor kid!” ejaculated Grizzy, but it was now Hazel’s turn to be impatient.

“Go on!” she urged. “This is the bit that I just couldn’t take in.”

“‘It is something to do with money,’” continued Grizzy. “‘Something to do with a girl, Hazel—I could never catch her other name—but, in any case, they seem to think she is dead, and I think they are going to pretend that you are that girl, so that they can claim this money through you.’”

“But I——” Hazel stopped herself just in time. “I mean, Hazel Warnford hasn’t any money worth bothering about. She must be imagining things.”

Grizzy pulled her brows together in a worried frown.

“I’m not so sure,” she demurred. “You know yourself there’s been a mystery about this Hazel What’s-her-name, ever since you met her in the train. And, after all, most mysteries *are* about money, aren’t they? Anyhow—listen to this last bit.”

“‘I wish I could help you more, but all I can do is to put you on your guard, and if anything crops up about this girl Hazel, you will be prepared. Whatever

is to happen, I know is to happen soon—they were terribly excited about it. I think it was some advertisement that they noticed, first of all, in a newspaper. But I hear Hannah coming, and I dare not let her find me writing. She would be sure to read it, and then the fat would be in the fire. And perhaps I am writing this all to no purpose, for you may never come near me to get it, but oh, I hope you will! Surely, surely, some sense will draw you towards this room and to your loving sister, Margaret.' ”

Grizzy's voice had a suspicious gruffness as she finished, and Hazel found herself blinking away an unexpected tear.

How wicked, she felt herself thinking, to be deceiving this girl, who was so obviously yearning with her whole heart for the coming of her sister. For a moment she was on the point of blurting out the whole complicated story, and ridding herself once and for all of this intolerable deception, but the memory of her promise restrained her—that foolish, stupid promise of years ago, it seemed, in the train. The promise, and, too, the thought that confession now might mean danger not only to herself but to Gaily. No—despite all its complexities she must continue the pretence—but more than ever Gaily More must be rescued.

Grizzy's voice was unwontedly serious as it broke in on her thoughts.

“Gaily,” she asked, “they haven't given you any hint of this—this trying to pass you off as Hazel Warnford, have they?”

Hazel shook her head.

“Not the slightest, only, you see, they might have

by this time, but they heard from me the very day I arrived that I had met her in the train. No wonder they both seemed so aghast about it. I couldn't understand why anybody should be excited about Hazel Warnford—but this explains it in a way—though where the money comes in, goodness knows!"

"Well, of course, if we could only get in touch with Hazel herself, she'd know all about it," commented Grizzy, while Hazel's mind echoed an amused "Would she, indeed!"

"But don't you think we could, Gaily?" finished the other. "Do wake up. I believe you're half asleep."

"Do what?" asked Hazel guiltily.

"There, I knew you weren't listening. I said, 'Don't you think we could'—creep out now, or in the early morning, and reconnoitre the house next door—Clevedon, you know—and see if we couldn't somehow find out where Hazel's room is—and—and maybe even speak to her," she finished ambitiously.

There was no doubt of Hazel's attention this time, and her eyes brightened at the thought of action, but slowly she shook her head.

"We couldn't to-night, I'm afraid. We'd be sure to be heard going out. Besides"—she looked at her watch—"it's nearly eleven o'clock. You'd better go off next door, Grizzy, for you know we pretended downstairs to be so terribly sleepy that if Aunt Mildred heard us talking she'd wonder why on earth we weren't in bed. But I don't see why we shouldn't slip out about half-past seven to-morrow morning."

Grizzy began to laugh softly.

"We can always pretend," she chuckled, "that



we're so well used to rising early at school, we couldn't bear to have a long lie—and oh, couldn't I just!"

"And breakfast in bed," supplemented Hazel wistfully.

"Good night," suddenly whispered the other, as steps could be heard ascending. "Bang on the wall at half-past seven, till you hear me getting up," and in a twinkling Grizzy was gone.

Hazel yawned as she slipped into bed and switched off the light. She hadn't realized how tired she was. It was to be hoped Grizzy wasn't depending too much on her to do the wakening next morning. Even a dozen alarm clocks buzzing together wouldn't suffice to keep her from sleeping another minute.

And then—as if in contradiction—the whole house suddenly broke into a tumult of ringing bells—loud, insistent, penetrating, and a wide-awake Hazel snatched up her dressing-gown and was out in the passage, shiveringly clutching an equally wakeful Grizzy.

"What is it?" they gasped fearfully, while from all parts of the house steps came running, and voices could be heard demanding the same question, and then—a mildly petulant, mildly surprised Great-Uncle Herbert could be heard:

"Dear me! Dear me! What's all the commotion about? Have you never heard the burglar alarm in operation before?"

CHAPTER X

Amanda and Brownie take a Hand

As so often before, where Great-Uncle Herbert was concerned, Hazel found herself wondering, once all the pandemonium had ceased, and she and Grizzy for a second time had bidden each other good night, whether his airy explanation had been the true one, and whether she had merely imagined that slightly worried look in his eyes.

"Nothing to be excited about," he had assured them. "I was merely looking at the alarm to see that it was in order when I inadvertently touched a vital part and—well you all heard for yourselves that it *was* working," he had concluded, with a feeble attempt at a joke; and as Aunt Mildred had appeared then and ordered them and the frightened maids, to "go back to bed at once", demanding too in scathing tones what they would have done if there really *had* been a burglar, she and Grizzy had slipped back to their rooms again, without managing to exchange any further comments.

But now sleep, which had seemed so overpowering only a short time ago, refused to come at all. Round and round went her mind, turning over all the problems and mysteries which were increasing daily—no hourly—for that the latest episode of the alarm had been a genuine warning, Hazel now began to have no doubt. There had been that worried look, which she

was actually learning to recognize, on Great-Uncle Herbert's face, and Aunt Mildred's voice had had that strained, high-pitched note that she had noticed several times before—whenever, she thought wryly, Hazel Warnford's name was mentioned, for instance.

No, she felt sure that someone outside *had* set that alarm going—but why? And why hadn't a search been started right away? But that, of course, was easy. There were only maids in the house, for Jones, the chauffeur, had been given leave till Monday morning, when he was to run her and Grizzy back to school. But Great-Uncle Herbert? Even in the darkness Hazel shook her head. He couldn't possibly tackle anyone on his own—and besides, he would know that the alarm would have frightened off the intruder—or intruders—long before he could be out in pursuit.

And then—a sudden wave of relief swept over her as she realized how nearly she and Grizzy might have given away their whole scheme. What a blessing that that alarm *had* gone off—no matter from what cause. Any attempt that they made now to slip out would have to be by the ordinary door, and that, too, after it had been opened by the maids in the morning.

With this comforting reflection Hazel's tired brain at long last went to sleep.

Unfortunately, it seemed only a few moments before an indignant snort beside her made her sit straight up in bed.

"H'mph yourself!" she retorted indignantly, as Grizzy stopped shaking her and her wits began to return. "It can't possibly be time to get up yet.

Anyhow, if you'd just spoken, I'd have heard you at once. I'm a very light sleeper."

This was too much for Grizzly.

"You must be," she remarked politely. "I've just been bawling into your ears for the last ten minutes, and all the answer I could get was a snore. But what about it, Gaily? It's a lovely morning. Come on—we could have a clear hour before breakfast."

"I thought you said it was a lovely morning," complained Hazel with chattering teeth, some five minutes later, as with Grizzly she made her way through the thick trees towards the wall which divided the Grange from Clevedon.

Grizzly beamed round at her—her high spirits seemed to be soaring, despite the sharp frostiness of the misty Autumn morning.

"Well, so it is—for our purpose. This mist *is* just lovely. Nobody could see us unless they almost bumped into us"—Hazel shuddered at the mere thought—"and if they hear us we're just disembodied voices," she concluded airily.

At that moment they reached the low dividing wall, and, with the phrase "disembodied voices" still lingering in their minds, there came floating eerily, weirdly, pathetically, a low, plaintive cry—silence—and again the wailing note—again—and again.

It was Hazel who grasped its meaning first. They had stood still, clutching each other, petrified with terror, their minds numbed in the panic of their senses, and then Hazel gave a little gasp.

"It's somebody calling 'Help!'"

Once more they listened, and now sure enough there

could be no doubt. From somewhere quite near at hand, over and over again, came the urgent and compelling wail: "Help! Help! Help!"

"I think there's more than one voice calling," Hazel hazarded again, but by this time they were already over the wall and plunging through the mist.

They had not far to go. Almost before they realized it, they had reached a small outbuilding—in the mist it looked like a gardener's tool-shed—and unmistakably from inside came the persistent cries for aid.

On the verge of calling out they hesitated, and it was well they did, for, from farther down the embankment, came the sound of heavy approaching footsteps, and all too late they realized the danger, or at least questionableness, of their own position. They were trespassing on private property, without a vestige of excuse to offer and, what was worse, without a scrap of cover if the mist should suddenly lift. Fortunately, at the moment, it was denser than ever.

"Keep still," breathed Grizzly, "it's our only chance to help."

"Sh'h'h," warned Hazel, "here he is!" and simultaneously a dark shape loomed up and approached the shed. As they had guessed from the heaviness of the steps, the newcomer was a man.

The next few moments were hectic with excitement.

The heavy, lumbering tread seemed to have had a quietening effect within the shed, for now the cries had ceased, but to the two frightened watchers there was a something tense and unnatural about the ensuing stillness: it was not a silence of relief, a welcoming

silence at the answer to their appeals—rather, it held a strained quality of dread. Somehow they realized instinctively that whoever had been longed for, this massive, uncouth figure certainly had not.

Breathlessly they heard, rather than saw, the key being inserted in the outhouse door, and automatically they tiptoed forward.

There was the sound of a scuffle and then the man's voice:

"Eh, but no you don't! You're not gettin' away that easy! If ye want to come moochin' and pryin' around here ye'll not get off wi' it. Come on now! The leddy at the hoose will be likin' to see you, I'll be thinkin'."

"Quick! Give me your scarf," whispered Hazel, and had it almost torn off poor Grizzly's neck as she spoke. Swiftly she knotted it to her own.

"Keep it low down across the door—you stand on the other side," and even as they slipped into position, one on either side of the wooden door, it was pulled awkwardly open.

"No, no—I'll be goin' first, and ye'll just——" But what was just to be done was never stated, for at that moment his unsuspecting feet caught in the knotted scarves, and he stumbled forward, almost pulling Grizzly and Hazel with him, had they not had the presence of mind to let go. With nothing to save him the heavy, clumsy figure sprawled full length with a crash, and at the same time, while his outwitters were still feeling slightly sick and dizzy with the strain, there rushed forth from the dark shed not one, but two, shadowy figures. The two dazed girls outside

peered stupidly through the mist. Could they be seeing aright?

"Quick!" hissed Weiry's incisive voice. "Yes, it's us—but for goodness' sake let's get out of this—he's beginning to rise."

Scarcely knowing whether she was in her right senses or not, Hazel found herself joining in the mad rush back the way she and Grizzly had come—but it was soon evident that they were for the time being free from pursuit. Their victim's voice followed them in scattered phrases.

"Young varmints! Ye'll hear more about this! I'll have the law on ye!" But soon, even these failed to reach them and it looked as if he had been too badly shaken to continue the chase.

Once over the dividing wall they at last drew breath.

"But how——?" began Hazel and Grizzly simultaneously, but Amanda almost imperiously stopped them.

"Not now," she said, "Brownie and I are in an awful pickle;" and indeed, as they looked at the usually round and beaming face of Brownie, they saw it for themselves. Both she and Weiry looked haggard with exhaustion.

"We've had the most ghastly night," Amanda was continuing, "but the whole trouble just now is how to get back to school without being found out. If we are, we're all going to be in a jam, and our chances of rescuing Hazel Warnford are—are gone for ever," she concluded hopelessly.

The four girls looked at each other despairingly.

"The mist's gone," Grizzy remarked inconsequently.

Amanda almost stamped with rage. "Yes, of course it has, and that makes it even worse. Can't *you* think of *something*, Gaily?" she asked imploringly.

"Yes," said Hazel calmly and surprisingly. "Why not come home and have breakfast with us? Now, don't go up in the air again!" she remonstrated, as the other showed signs of a wrathful "Talk sense!" attitude, and poor Brownie, with almost a sob, put in, "Oh, do let's! But will it be all right, Gaily?"

Hazel nodded. With the lifting of the mist there had come upon her the strangest feeling of confidence. Even Grizzy's awestruck gaze, as about five minutes later they encountered Aunt Mildred at the door of the breakfast room, did nothing to shake it.

"Oh, Aunt Mildred," she began easily, "do you think Amanda and Sheila could have breakfast with us? We've all got into the most dreadful scrape and—and we're hoping you'll 'phone Miss Steading and put it right. They're simply *terrified* to go back to school."

There was an amused chuckle, and Hazel found herself blessing Great-Uncle Herbert.

"So girls will be girls!" he remarked, appearing from within the room, and then, as his keen little eyes took in their bedraggled appearance, she saw suspicion chase amusement from his face—but it was only for a moment.

"Of course, of course!" he exclaimed heartily. "You all look as if you needed some breakfast. Come along, and entertain your Aunt and me with your wicked escapades, and surely we'll manage to make

up *some* excuse for Miss Steading. Bit of a terror is she?" he went on, as he ushered them in. "Head-mistresses usually are, aren't they?"

"Oh, she can be," agreed Brownie, who at sight of the comfortable, firelit room, with breakfast ready waiting, was rapidly recovering her poise.

"Yet I've to brave her wrath," laughed Aunt Mildred, who also appeared to be accepting the situation with composure. "Well, breakfast first, and then you can tell us all about it."

Hazel could feel three pairs of anxious eyes turning in her direction. It was plain that the others were leaving it to her, but the amazing calm which had descended on her still continued, and quite unperturbed she attacked her bacon and egg, coffee and toast, with the utmost relish.

"That," said Grizzy at last, "is the most scrumptious breakfast I've ever had."

"M'm'm," murmured Amanda and Brownie in rapturous agreement, while still consuming their toast and marmalade.

Great-Uncle Herbert almost purred with pleasure.

"Well, Gaily," he beamed, "and what is this dreadful tale we are to hear? Your Aunt and I are agog with curiosity. What crime have you all been committing?"

Hazel hoped that she had smothered Brownie's little gasp by dropping her teaspoon, but in spite of that there was a moment's awkward pause while she retrieved it from the floor.

"A crime?" she laughed. "I'm afraid it's nothing so exciting. It was just a 'dare' you know—Grizzy

and I 'dared' Amanda and Brownie to slip out of school early this morning to meet us, and I'm afraid they said we'd never manage to be up in time, so just to show each other that we could, we all did—get up early, I mean. Only——” she hesitated.

“And what went wrong?” prompted Great-Uncle Herbert.

“*They* did,” laughed Hazel, but a little ruefully, while her heart thumped furiously in the effort to carry off her story. “Grizzy and I hate to admit it, but they were earlier than we were and, instead of meeting us half-way, they came on, and, in the mist, turned in at the wrong entrance, and got hopelessly lost.”

“The wrong entrance?” put in Aunt Mildred—and her voice had the cold forbidding note that Hazel had learned to dread. “Where was that? Do you mean Clevedon—or Graylands on the other side?”

“It was the house before this,” put in Weiry, “that's Clevedon, isn't it? The mist was so dense we were finding our way by guess-work, and we were sure we had come far enough.”

“And we hadn't,” supplemented Brownie, gallantly trying now to do her share.

“Well,” resumed Hazel, “that was the trouble, and when Grizzy and I went out we were searching for them for ages, and chuckling because we thought they hadn't risked our 'dare' after all, when suddenly we heard them calling, from away across the dividing wall.”

“Yes, and that was what caused all the bother,” put in Brownie ruefully.

Hazel nodded and went on confidently—she had

her story in order now, and managed even to put a hint of laughter into her voice.

"It did, for we weren't the only ones to hear. Just as we got over into the Clevedon grounds and started calling back, we heard somebody else running, and suddenly a huge figure came towards us out of the mist. I expect it was a gardener, but he looked fearsome in that light and he was raging away to himself about 'trespassing varmints' I think it was, and of course Amanda and Sheila had the bad luck just to come up at that moment."

Great-Uncle Herbert gave an appreciative chuckle which Hazel forced herself to notice.

"It wasn't so very funny then for, you see, he made straight for them, and goodness knows what would have happened if—if Grizzy and I hadn't managed to trip him up."

"Trip him up?" echoed Aunt Mildred incredulously, while Great-Uncle Herbert's little eyes glittered.

Hazel nodded. "Yes, we slipped ahead and put our scarves knotted together in front of him, and of course he fell, and—and that's how we all got away safely."

"Well, well!" exclaimed Great-Uncle Herbert, "who would have believed it?" and he shook with laughter. "But why are you worrying? If it was so misty he couldn't see who you were—so you're not likely to hear any more about it."

But the girls shook their heads dismally.

"We had to leave our scarves," said Hazel.

"And they've got the school crest all over them," added Grizzy. "And whoever owns the house will communicate with school," further explained Amanda.

"And Miss Steading will know it's us, because we're not there!" almost wailed Brownie.

And, as they sat in aghast silence pondering this impasse, the telephone rang loudly.

"That'll be Miss Steading!" gasped the four girls simultaneously.

Aunt Mildred rose uncertainly, but Great-Uncle Herbert was before her."

"Leave this to me, Mildred," and he strode into the hall as the telephone rang insistently for the second time.

CHAPTER XI

First Appearance of Thomas

"I *do* like Great-Uncle Herbert, Gaily," said Brownie enthusiastically.

Hazel repressed an inward shudder. "Yes, he managed that very neatly, thank goodness," she admitted.

"But there are still the scarves," put in Amanda seriously.

"And they'll take some explaining," commented Grizzy.

Hazel gave a rueful little laugh and then looked quizzically at the two figures squatting on cushions on the floor.

"They're not the only things that need explaining," she remarked severely. "Do you realize that you've not yet told Grizzy and me how you two came to be locked up in that tool-shed?"

Amanda laughed softly. "I know. Between the story you concocted downstairs, and now Great-Uncle Herbert's excuses to Miss Steading, I've almost forgotten what really happened."

"I haven't," protested Brownie stoutly. "It was the horriblest night I've ever endured."

They were all seated comfortably around the fire in Hazel's room, and up till now relief at their escape from their awkward predicament had swamped all other topics.

When Great-Uncle Herbert had returned from the 'phone beaming blandly upon them and announced that it hadn't been Miss Steading after all, despair had seized them once more, but when he had followed up by saying that he had 'phoned her and made things all right for the two culprits, Brownie, if she had had a hat, would certainly have thrown it in the air. As it was, she gave vent to a joyous "Hurrah", and received an extra special beam from Great-Uncle Herbert.

"Your absence had just been reported to Miss Steading," he explained, "and I think she was so relieved to hear that you were safe and sound that—well, I imagine you'll get off with a fairly mild lecture. In any case, she gave permission quite readily when I asked if you might stay overnight and go back with Gaily and Griselda to-morrow morning."

Even the cautious Amanda had burst out with "Oh, how lovely!" and Sheila Brown-Browne's exuberance had drawn a tolerant smile even from Aunt Mildred.

It was thanks to her suggestion that they might like

to rest upstairs after all their excitement that they now found themselves cosily ensconced in Hazel's room.

Amanda surveyed Brownie with twinkling eyes.

"Aunt Mildred didn't say 'rest and tidy up', but I'm pretty certain she meant it. You've no idea what a sight you look."

"Yes, I have, if I'm anything like you," retorted Brownie pertly. "You should just have a look in that mirror."

"No, no, not yet," interposed Hazel hurriedly; "you do look awful, both of you."

"But we're getting used to it," murmured Grizzly in a resigned whisper, but Hazel went on unheeding.

"You must tell us what happened to you. I say"—with a sudden burst of inspiration—"was it you who set off the burglar alarm last night?"

Amanda nodded solemnly, and Brownie's eyes grew round.

"How did you know?" she gasped. "Was that what made you come and look for us? How clever of you, Gaily!"

Hazel shook her head.

"We didn't—know, I mean. I just thought of it this minute. But, look here, what about beginning at the beginning and telling us the whole story."

"That's right," approved Grizzly, "spill the beans, children, and be slick about it."

"I wish Bells could hear you," chuckled Amanda, "you'd be writing lines till the end of next year. But what about it, Brownie? I suppose there's nothing for it but to tell them the awful truth?"

Brownie nodded dolefully.

"We'll have to, but I was so proud of being 'Sherlock Brown-Browne' and 'Amanda Weir Thorndyke' sounded absolutely lovely!"

Grizzy burst out laughing. "So *that* was it! You did try to do a little sleuthing on your own after all. Perhaps you realize by now that it takes brains. What a pity that you should have gone to all that trouble and have found out nothing."

"Who said that?" queried Amanda in her silkiest tones. "We certainly had bad luck, but we've found out quite a lot—if only we can use it."

"So put that in your pipe and smoke it," added Brownie inelegantly.

Hazel laughed.

"Do tell us quickly," she begged.

Amanda drew a long breath and her face grew serious.

"I think I've been trying to delay telling you—it was all so horrible at the time," she admitted, "but I'll be as quick as I can now. Brownie and I felt frightfully flat after you had gone yesterday——"

"Goodness!" ejaculated Brownie, "was it just yesterday? It seems years ago."

The others nodded as Amanda went on.

"Somehow I think it was just that chance remark that I made about 'doing a little sleuthing on our own' that put it into our heads, for we really hadn't had the slightest idea of doing anything, but—well, Brownie seized on to the idea, and the next thing we knew we had planned to slip out after Lights-out and see if we couldn't discover anything about the mysterious Hazel."

Hazel, as always when her name cropped up, felt a sick feeling of guilt, but her confusion went unnoticed as Griselda exclaimed, "You *were* taking a chance. Of course it wasn't so risky when there was nobody else in the dorm."

"No—actually that part was perfectly easy. We slipped down the rone pipe, as we've often done before, and our main worry was how we'd manage to get back in again."

"And that was the one thing we needn't have worried about," put in Brownie, "for we didn't get back at all."

"But where *were* you all that time?" asked Hazel. "Were you locked up in that shed all night?"

"No, no—not *all* night. But you mustn't interrupt like this, or I'll never be finished. As I say, we were soon on our way towards Clevedon, and though it was a bit frightening to be out so late, it was really rather jolly too. There was a lovely moon, and everything was as clear as day, and Brownie and I simply scampered along the road—so excited we didn't feel the cold a bit. We had intended going to Clevedon right away, when it suddenly occurred to me that you and Grizzy might still be awake, and if we could attract your attention somehow, you might join us and we'd all go scouting round together."

"You attracted our attention right enough!" laughed Grizzy. "I never heard such a din."

"Oh, wasn't it ghastly? We had crept up the avenue——"

"And that was horribly eerie," added Brownie.

"It was a bit, but when we came out from among

the trees everything looked most cheerful and inviting, for most of the downstairs windows were ablaze with light, and we felt sure that you would still be up."

"The lights were rather a nuisance for the curtains hadn't been drawn closely—especially in that big room to the left of the door, where we felt you probably were. However, we decided we'd risk a peep in. I stood up on the sill and found that I could see fairly well through the gap in the curtains, and then Brownie joined me, but as far as we could make out, neither of you was there—just Great-Uncle Herbert and Aunt Mildred on either side of the fireplace, talking nineteen to the dozen."

"We went off upstairs early," Hazel volunteered. "We wanted to plan some sleuthing too."

"Well, this is the bit we're rather ashamed of," went on Amanda. "It seemed awful to have come all that length and not be a bit 'forrader' and—and——" her voice faltered.

"You decided to listen in?" supplied Grizzy with a mischievous grin.

Amanda laughed. "Exactly! So I suppose we deserved all that happened. Brownie and I tried to raise the lower window sash and immediately there was the most awful din. Bells ringing like mad all over the place, and I can just remember a glimpse of Great-Uncle Herbert and Aunt Mildred starting up, and dashing towards the window when Brownie and I practically fell off the sill, and ran for our lives, and didn't halt till we were in among the trees, and having to stop to draw breath—we were both so gasping with terror!"

"And yet the worst bit," put in Brownie seriously, "was when nobody really did pursue us, but we kept imagining that everywhere round about was just alive with people—bushes crackled, and twigs snapped, or at least we thought they did, though probably it was just ourselves shaking."

The listeners nodded sympathetically, and Amanda took up the tale again.

"I think we'd have stayed there till now if we hadn't heard the front door opening. I expect it would be Great-Uncle Herbert taking a cautious look out, but of course we didn't know that, and thought our last moment had come. We simply bolted again. We must have lost all sense of direction, for the first thing we knew we were held up by a wall, and it was only when we had climbed over it and found ourselves not on the main road once more, as we had expected, but in private grounds again, that it dawned on us we must be in Clevedon."

"And we wouldn't have been long *there*, if you'd taken *my* advice," added Brownie.

Amanda laughed. "I'm sorry I was so obstinate, but you've no idea how brave and safe I felt as soon as that wall lay between us, and I did feel it was a pity to go back to school without having just a look at Clevedon."

"So I had to give in," said Brownie, resignedly, "though I was still shaking like a jelly. Besides, I felt sure that the whole house would be shut up for the night by the time we reached it, and that we couldn't possibly hear or see anything of the mysterious Hazel."

"And that," said Amanda, "was where the great brain scored, for, you see, we did."

"You actually saw her? Were you speaking to her?" gasped the real Hazel, her voice quivering with excitement.

Amanda frowned, then smiled broadly. "This is our big moment, Brownie. I was working up to it gradually, but Gaily here is too quick. Yes, it's true we not only saw Hazel Warnford, but we spoke to her."

There was a hushed silence for a few seconds.

"Tell us," breathed Grizzy. "Have you discovered what all the mystery is about?"

"Well—er—not quite, but I-dare say we soon will. You see, when we crept down towards the house, which we could see standing out quite clearly in the moonlight, I hadn't much hope either of finding out anything at that time of night. But when we reached the fringe of the lawn—we risked going out into the open because everything was so peaceful—and looked up at the dark frontage of the house, golly! we nearly died on the spot, for one of the second-floor windows was open, and a head popped out, staring straight at us."

"And was it—Hazel?" gasped Hazel herself, with the usual momentary hesitation before the false name, but Amanda swept on unheeding.

"Yes, thank goodness it was, and thank goodness Brownie spotted her in time, and waved her hankie as a—a——"

"White flag of peace," supplied the other proudly, "at least it looked white in that light, though it was

pretty grubby really. Anyhow, I don't believe it was needed at all, for she hadn't the least intention of giving the alarm—she had been expecting us to turn up, you see."

"Expecting us?" repeated Grizzy, and then, as light dawned. "Oh, because of the 'Help!' on the piece of cardboard?"

The others nodded.

"As soon as we saw her wave, we crept immediately below her window, but unfortunately there are no rone pipes at that particular spot, so we couldn't climb up to her and she whispered that it would be too risky for her to come downstairs. The whole thing *was* too risky really, even in whispers, for we just had time to tell her that we were from school, and that you, Gaily, and Grizzy, were at the Grange, but were hoping to reconnoitre to-morrow—that's to-day, of course, and she had just whispered 'Come about three o'clock, the top gate', when suddenly she gasped "Look out!" and drew in her head, and Brownie and I turned to see that awful man creeping stealthily towards us."

"The one we tripped up this morning?" queried Grizzy.

"Yes, only he looked even worse in the shadowy moonlight. We took to our heels, but we hadn't a chance for, of course, we didn't know the grounds, and we simply floundered into all the most difficult places—I think we got into the middle of the vegetable garden. I never did like cabbages but I hadn't thought they could be so spiteful—the way they tripped us up at every turn with their nasty old stalks and leaves. But, to make a long story short, he caught up

with us in no time, and marched us off to that beastly tool-shed where you found us."

"Oh, it was horrible!" shuddered Brownie, "and he was the most awful creature, muttering things about 'thieves and varmints', and I believe he really thought we were there to steal his cabbages, for he sounded almost tearful about them. 'My beauties, what I've tended that careful. There be'ant cabbages in the whole country to touch them, and ye rampagin' young villains come and trample them. Oh, but I'll see ye're jailed for this! My cabbages!'" and Brownie wailed pathetically, and rolled her eyes in imitation of their captor's grief, till the others rocked with laughter.

"It's all very well to laugh——" began Amanda, when a gong sounded downstairs.

"Lunch!" gasped Hazel, "and we haven't planned a thing for the afternoon."

"We haven't washed any of the grime off—that's worse! Come on, Brownie, you simply can't go down to lunch looking like that. I'll have to scrub the cabbages off you."

"Right-oh," agreed Brownie amicably. "Far be it from me to make rude remarks—but just wait till you see yourself. Only, if I'm so bad I'd better have first scrub," and, with Amanda in hot pursuit, she raced for the bathroom.

CHAPTER XII

Thomas Leaves a Clue

"You know," said Amanda, stopping in the middle of the path, as much to draw breath as to add anything to their discussions, "I don't see why we couldn't just have gone quite openly to the Clevedon front door and—and——"

"And asked if Hazel could come out to play wif' us," mocked Brownie in a childish voice.

"Yes, and then wouldn't we have had our cabbagey friend racing up and wagglng our scarves, and saying, 'I've got you this time!' No, no, Weiry, on we go. It's the top gate for us, even if the road does 'wind uphill all the way'," and Grizzly, who was leading, sternly marched on.

They had not yet crossed the dividing wall, and all four, like Amanda, were feeling the steepness of the ascent, and also rather dreading what their next invasion of the Clevedon grounds might bring forth. Hazel, especially, kept wondering how Gaily would act—would she let the others know about their changed identities—would she explain what all this mystery was about—would she——? But her cogitations were cut short by a sigh of relief from Amanda.

"Well, we're at the top, anyway, and it doesn't look as if we'd need to trespass after all. See—there's a road running along here once we go out of this gate. This must be *your* top gate, Gaily, yes, and look down

the road a bit, that must be the Clevedon one. Don't see any sign of friend Hazel though. It'll be rather a blight if she doesn't turn up."

It certainly would, agreed Hazel mentally, and, as the minutes passed, and they all four waited vainly by the padlocked, wooden gate, and no one appeared, disappointment ousted every other feeling.

"You're sure it was 3 o'clock she said——" Hazel was beginning when Amanda uttered a warning "Sh'h'h!" and automatically all four crouched down in the shelter of the wall.

There was certainly someone coming, but as they pressed in closer against the rough stones their hearts beat wildly, for the steps approaching lumberingly up through the Clevedon grounds were not those of a light-footed girl, and in each mind the awful, unspoken dread came uppermost: were they again to be confronted with their pursuer of the morning?

It sounded like it, for now, accompanying the heavy steps, came the muttering, mumbling voice which had already inspired them with such terror, and with the return of their fear came the realization of how hopelessly inadequate was their hiding-place. Certainly, they were not trespassing at the moment, but let the uncouth gardener once catch sight of them, and he'd be almost certain to recognize them as the former intruders. It was only Amanda's warning frown that kept them from immediately taking to flight.

It was well that she restrained them for, just as discovery seemed certain, the footsteps stopped, and the mumbling words became audible.

"'No, no, Thomas,'" they heard, in an affected

would-be high-pitched tone. "'No, no, you'll do nothing about the scarves. Just a young ladies' prank, and after all you weren't hurt, were you?' Warn't hurt, warn't I not?'" Thomas was now obviously talking in his own character. "Warn't hurt, indeed! No, not if it ain't hurt to be bruised black and blue all down me side, and me still seeing stars and whirligigs a-goin' round inside me head. I'd 'warn't hurt' them if I could lay hands on them—not to speak of the damage they done to my cabbages! And then that Miss Hazel—she comes up that perlite and persuasive. I'll not be saying she's not different from them young varmint's this mornin', but just for why should I have to climb up to this 'ere gate to please her? Howsomedever, I said I would. 'Promise me, Thomas. Promise,'" and his voice tried, not very successfully, to mimic the girl's evidently pleading tones, "'and you won't let anyone see you hiding it, will you, Thomas? It's only a joke, but I don't want Mrs. Archer to know.' Maybe 'tis a joke," and Thomas resumed his own mumbling, "but there's more'n a joke going on in that there house. I'd like fine to know what it's all about." The four listeners stiffened. So would they! "Well, here goes. 'Under the big flat stone by the top gate,' she said, and this 'ere be the only big stone at all, so up ye come," and now, casting caution to the winds, the four girls peered almost openly as Thomas raised a heavy stone and placed something, they could not discern what, underneath.

The clumsy figure straightened itself, only to give a fresh grunt of annoyance.

"Dang it, I thought I were done! I nearly forgot the arrow." The girls cowered back again as they saw him glance searchingly around, but in a moment he resumed. "Ay—this'll do"—how they blessed his habit of talking to himself: "'Just draw an arrow on the ground, Thomas, with any little bit of stick. Not a noticeable arrow, but just one that anybody who was really looking would be likely to see—an arrow pointing from the gate to the stone.' Eh—well, surely that's all now an' a fine heap of bother it's been to me, but there—I couldn't not do it after her callin' me a darlin'! He! he! 'Oh, Thomas, you're a darling. I've nobody else to help me.' He! he! Me a darlin'!" and Thomas went off as nearly into hysterics as his cumbrous frame would permit; "but she's not like them other varmints, that I will allow," they could hear him mumbling as he turned to retrace his way downhill. "But me a darlin'. He! he! he!" and his shoulders shaking with unwonted laughter, Thomas lumbered out of sight.

"Oh, sh'h'h!" gasped Hazel, as Brownie's pent-up mirth exploded. "He'll hear you," but it was of no avail. Whether Thomas had returned on the instant or not they could not have helped it. They laughed till the tears ran down their cheeks.

"Oh, Thomas is my darling!" choked Grizzly.

"Oh, darling Thomas!" gurgled Brownie.

"Who would have believed it?" laughed Amanda, and even Hazel, worried as she was, chuckled appreciatively.

"Yes, but let's see what he left under the stone," she urged, leading the way. "He won't come back

now and it's quite obvious that G—" she almost tripped up over the name again—"Hazel," she substituted quickly, "couldn't come herself."

She saw Amanda glancing at her curiously, and felt herself flushing. She must be more careful, but meantime excitement drove out every other feeling.

"Ouf-f-fl! No wonder Thomas grunted over this stone," exclaimed Grizzy, as she and Hazel tugged it up on end.

"And all that bother for *that*," gasped Brownie disgustedly, and pointed to the crushed and earth-stained match-box which now lay revealed.

"Ah, but think of all the information that even a match-box can hold—it's maybe the clue to millions of pounds," commented Amanda, as Hazel with trembling fingers straightened the crushed cardboard and drew out the box.

The expression on her face was enough to show another disappointment.

"Maybe it is—a clue, I mean, but there's jolly little of it. Look—only that snippet of newspaper."

The others crowded round and peered with her at the insignificant scrap.

Brownie emitted a low whistle.

"Am I seeing right—is our Hazel going to come in for millions after all? Read it out, Gaily. This is just too thrilling!"

Making an effort to steady her voice, Hazel read the brief notice:

"Wanted urgently before Nov. 21 next, any information regarding Hazel Warnford, Orphan."

That was all, apart from a box number to *The Times*, to which reply was to be made.

Her heart was racing madly. Who—*who* could be wanting information about *her*, and why? Fortunately amid the chatter of the others her confusion went unnoticed.

“And is that really all, Gaily?” queried Amanda. “Is there nothing else in the box, or scratched on the cardboard or anything?” she finished rather weakly.

Hazel shook her head. “Not that I can see, but look yourself.”

In turn, each one examined the crushed match-box, but not even the most minute scrutiny could reveal anything further.

“Funny she didn’t put in a note or suggest what she wanted us to do,” commented Amanda.

“She can’t have had time—or else she’s being so closely watched she may not have had a chance,” suggested Brownie, “but it looks as if she wanted us to do something about this,” and she pointed to the newspaper cutting.

Hazel nodded, and carefully enclosed the paper in its box again. Of course she wanted them to do something about the notice—that was obvious—but what was not obvious to the others was the real difficulty underlying this strange mystery—the difficulty that was known only to Gaily and herself—their change of identities. For the many hundredth time she wished, with a sick feeling of hopelessness, that she had never agreed to the ridiculous exchange. If only——

“Oh, cheer up, Gaily!” urged Grizzy. “After all, we are a bit further forward. Advertisements like that

are nearly always about fortunes, so we'll need to do our best for the poor kid. It looks as if Mrs. Archer's trying to do her out of her millions, and we're certainly not going to have that!"

"Rather not!" agreed Brownie, "and we haven't much time——"

"Yes, that's what I'm wondering about," broke in Amanda. "I wonder why it's to be before Nov. 21."

"Oh, that's easy——" began Hazel unguardedly, only to break off in confusion, but fortunately Brownie came to the rescue.

"Is that so, Sherlock?" she inquired politely, evidently treating Hazel's remark as an ironical joke. "Of course, I think so too, but *they're* so hopelessly ignorant, perhaps you'd better explain to *them*," and she waved an expressive hand towards Amanda and Griselda.

Hazel laughed—she had recovered her poise again. "Well, let's be moving back," she suggested, "we're too near the enemy's quarters here," although, as she spoke, she felt an inward shudder. Were they not on equally hostile ground within the confines of the Grange?

"I spoke without thinking," she went on, "about its being easy, I mean, but I'm inclined to think I'm right. The 21st of November must be Hazel Warnford's birthday." Only too well she knew it was. "I'm sure she said in the train she'd be thirteen next month, and now we're into next month. So you see, I was just putting two and two together."

"Sounds quite feasible," said Amanda judicially, "and, as I said, it doesn't leave us much time."

"Oh, but it makes it thriller than ever," enthused Brownie. "Missing heiress—will inherit millions on next birthday—being kept prisoner by wicked crooks."

"That's what I can't understand," said Hazel. "Why is she—well, practically being kept a prisoner, as you say?"

"And Mrs. Archer doesn't look like a crook," demurred Grizzy.

"N-n-o," conceded Amanda; "but do they ever, except in pictures and plays and things? I didn't like her very much, and after all, Hazel begged for help, when she left us the little bit of cardboard."

"And then where do Great-Uncle Herbert and Aunt Mildred come in?" queried Brownie. "To begin with it looked as if they were in the mystery, but you just can't imagine that *they* would be up to anything—er—crooked, now, can you? They're so nice."

"Oh, they're in it too," said Hazel wearily. "Think of that letter from the girl in the locked room"—only after she said it did she realize she ought to have called her "my sister"—"and—and think of—oh, the hundreds of little things I've told you about, and even that you've noticed yourselves. Besides, the letter proved that they have some plot afoot with regard to Hazel Warnford and—and with me in it too—though goodness knows how, or where, or why."

"And what mischief have the scapegraces been into this afternoon?" boomed a familiar voice, before any comment could be made, and from among the trees came Great-Uncle Herbert, his bright little eyes twinkling under his broad-brimmed hat.

How much had he heard, wondered Hazel, her heart almost stopping beating in the sudden panic, but Amanda smiled easily.

"Oh, just exploring your lovely grounds," she remarked. "We've had quite enough 'mischief' with our morning adventure, thank you."

"With the redoubtable Thomas? Ha, ha! And now you're coming back as hungry as hunters for tea?" He pulled out his old-fashioned gold watch. "Dear me! We'd better hurry, or we'll be late, and Aunt Mildred will have something to say about *that*."

They were on the wide avenue now, leading down to the house, and Brownie, beside Great-Uncle Herbert, kept prattling to him merrily.

"I feel quite like hurrying," she was saying. "After my enormous lunch I thought I'd never be hungry again, but now I could devour——"

"An ox," supplied Grizzy obligingly.

Amanda rested a hand on Hazel's arm and held her back for a moment.

"How did he know he was called 'Thomas?'" she breathed. "We didn't know till this afternoon."

Hazel nodded soberly. "I noticed that too," she whispered. "Oh, Weiry, I think he's *frightfully* dangerous—just because he seems so harmless and nice!"

CHAPTER XIII

Return to St. Margaret's

"So now, where are we?" demanded Grizzy despondently.

"Back in Study 6 at St. Margaret's," responded Brownie brightly, only to be met with withering looks from the others.

"If we don't know *that*, after our half-hour with Miss Steading," commented Amanda ruefully. "I'm not likely to forget it anyway."

There were groans of agreement.

"It just shows what hypocrites grown-ups are," said Grizzy. "She must have been positively honeyed when she spoke to Great-Uncle Herbert on the 'phone, and then when *we* arrived——" she shuddered with exaggerated horror.

"It was hard lines that you and Gaily were dragged into it, but we just had to stick to the 'dare' story—I don't know what would have happened if she'd known we had spent the night locked up in the toolshed." And Amanda looked genuinely worried.

"Oh *that*!" said Hazel. "That's nothing. Besides, I've never had lines to write before, and I'm quite looking forward to it. Does it take awfully long to do five hundred?"

"Oh, throw something at her, somebody," groaned Amanda.

Obligingly Brownie discharged the study's one

cushion in Hazel's direction, but unfortunately the dreadful luck which had dogged them since their return to school had still not done its worst. The door opened, just as Hazel ducked, and the whizzing cushion—for Brownie had heaved it with no gentle hand—caught the latest entrant full on the face.

There was a gasp of horror, succeeded by a petrified silence as Miss Ringer, looking more astonished than angry for the moment, stood on the threshold.

But only for the moment—wrath and indignation almost immediately swept every other expression from her countenance.

"What is the meaning of this?" And her four pupils quailed before her.

"I—I——" began Amanda bravely.

"We—we——" stuttered Brownie and Grizzly simultaneously.

"It—it—was a mistake, Miss Bell," said Hazel, only to stop short with a squeal of pain as Grizzly pinched her arm.

"Oh, Jehoshaphat!" burst uncontrollably from Brownie. "That's done it!"

It had—but not in the way she meant.

For what seemed an interminable age their form-mistress surveyed them in icy disapproval, while their already low spirits sank to unbelievable depths of lowness, and then—once more there was a gasp, but this time of wondering relief.

Could it be? Yes, it was. Beginning as just the ghost of a twinkle, it had suddenly developed into a full-sized smile.

"I shall come back in five minutes—you can have

your story ready by that time," and Miss Ringer swept out, as unexpectedly as she had come in.

"Gosh!" said Brownie inelegantly, but fortunately the door had closed.

"I think she was frightened she was going to laugh," exclaimed Grizzy in awed tones.

"We've Gaily to thank for that, then," laughed Amanda.

"Me? But what did *I* do?" asked Hazel, still rubbing her arm, and looking reproachfully at Griselda. "I was only trying to explain."

Even the imminent return of the form-mistress could not check the shout of laughter that greeted this remark. So infectious indeed was it that Hazel was forced to join in, although still completely at sea as to what it was all about.

"'Miss Bell'," gurgled Brownie, still hugging the offending cushion, and sinking into a chair in an ecstasy of mirth. "'Miss Bell'—oh, my hat!" and she went off into a fresh spasm.

A horrifying light began to dawn on Hazel. Her jaw dropped.

"Miss Ringer!" she gasped. "Goodness, what must she have thought?"

"Stop eating that cushion, Brownie," said Amanda, suddenly recovering her gravity, "it's the only one we've got. It's not so much what she thought," and she turned to Hazel, "it's what we're to say to her when she comes back."

"What's even more important is—what did she come in for, to begin with," put in Grizzy.

"Sh's'h, here she is," warned Amanda, and Hazel

feverishly searched her mind for words of apology, as the door opened once more.

"Oh, please, Miss Ringer——" she was beginning, with a suspicion of a gulp before the unfortunate name, but the form-mistress smilingly interrupted.

"Don't worry, Abigail," she said kindly. "I know it was just a mistake and"—she looked at the four serious faces—"I suppose the cushion was too."

"Oh yes, Miss Ringer, truly, Miss Ringer," Brownie burst in, "it wasn't meant for you."

"H'm'ph! It's hardly what would have been called a 'lady-like reception' for anybody in *my* young days," was the rather chilling comment; "however, we'll let that pass. Meantime," her eyes ranged over the still apprehensive faces, "I wish to speak to you on another matter."

They held their breath expectantly, sensing somehow, even before her gaze came to rest on Hazel, that the announcement would have to do with her. Even so, they were unprepared for what followed.

"Abigail!" Hazel repressed a shudder. "Gaily" had been difficult enough to grow used to, but "Abigail!" "Your friend, Hazel Warnford, is not coming to school after all—at least, not this term. Miss Steading wished me to tell you, as she felt she had been a little incredulous with regard to your story. Actually, a letter has come to-day which makes it quite plain that you really did meet the girl on your journey here."

"Of course I did," commented Hazel's mind indignantly, but forgot even her indignation as the other went on.

"The letter is from her guardian, a lawyer, I think——"

Hazel nodded. "Yes, Mr. Golding," she remarked unguardedly.

Miss Ringer looked surprised.

"Yes, that *was* the name Miss Steading mentioned. You appear to have gleaned a great deal of information during your short acquaintance, Abigail," and she laughed good-humouredly. "Well, as I say, this letter informs Miss Steading that Hazel Warnford has been actually staying in this district with her guardian's sister, but as her health is not too satisfactory, they have decided she had better have a trip abroad, and the sister is taking her back to London on Friday to make arrangements for their tour. Did she look delicate—Hazel Warnford, I mean?"

Hazel's pent-up emotions, which had been seething to boiling point as she listened to this recital, now exploded.

"Delicate?" she echoed, with such fervour that the form-mistress looked at her in surprise. "She wasn't a bit delicate, Miss Ringer. She—she was every bit as fit to look at as I am!"

The irony of this remark would have struck her at any other time, but at the moment her mind was wrestling with the idea of making a full confession and of enlisting Miss Ringer's aid, but the other had already begun to speak, and the opportunity was lost.

"Oh well, parents and guardians, you know, are apt to be a little fussy about their charges, and certainly, from the letter, one would gather that they were really worried about her. However, Abigail, you won't need

to bother any further now, and you have the satisfaction too of knowing that Miss Steading realizes your story was true, and that your imagination hadn't run away with you. So you'll feel your mind quite at ease now, won't you, and will be able to settle down to work in earnest. Dear me, it's nearly time for prep," and with merely a nod in response to Hazel's dazed "Yes, thank you, Miss Ringer," she bustled off.

Hazel turned to gaze blankly at the others, who had been listening with rapt attention to the little colloquy.

"So now, what?" asked Grizzy. "Does that mean you'll just have to forget all about her after all, Gaily?"

"And feel your mind at ease?" quoted Amanda softly.

"And settle down to work in earnest like a good girl?" mocked Brownie.

To her surprise and shame Hazel felt tears, whether of baffled rage or despair she knew not, start to her eyes.

"What does it mean?" she gulped, repeating Grizzy's question. "Don't you *see* what it means: that Hazel's in some tremendous danger and, if we can't do something, she'll be taken off to London and we'll never see or hear of her again? We've *got* to do something—and—and—you ask if we're just to forget all about it!" What was meant to be a scathing climax unfortunately finished in a sob.

"Have a toffee," said Brownie kindly. "It's a bit papery, for it's stuck to the bag."

"Yes, do," urged Grizzy, joining in the task of detaching it. "Glucose, you know, is frightfully good for you. Soothes and strengthens delicate nerves. Only

I think this is just treacle—but it will probably do as well."

"My nerves aren't a bit delicate," Hazel protested with something between a gulp and a snort, but found further speech impossible for the moment, as the toffee was popped into her mouth, and proved surprisingly soothing.

"That's better," approved Amanda with a twinkle. "Now, listen to me, young woman, and don't get excited like that again. We're in this with you."

"Up to the neck," supported Brownie.

"Through thick and thin," added Grizzy, with pretended disapproval of the other's slang.

"Exactly," nodded Amanda, "to the very eyebrows. And we see too that something's got to be done—and before Friday. And," she concluded solemnly, "we're going to do it. We'll have to have a confab after prep and decide on a plan of campaign."

"Gosh, there's the bell!" exclaimed Brownie, slipping down from the table where she had been seated. "Swallow that toffee quickly, Gaily, even if it chokes you. Bells simply has a fit if anyone eats sweets in form."

Hazel struggled to comply, and at the same time looked round at them with eyes that were suspiciously near to swimming again, but this time with gratitude and relief at the warm friendliness that surrounded her.

"I—I—don't know how to thank——" she was beginning to stammer, but Amanda seized her by one arm, Brownie by the other, and marched her through the door.

"You wondered if it would take long to do five hundred lines," Grizzy remarked, as she followed in their rear. "Looks to me as if we'll be having a thousand to play about with, if we don't get a move on. Buck up!" and she scampered past them, her fair pigtails flying.

"Prophetic spirit," chuckled Amanda, as they reached the form-room door to find a sadly chastened Grizzy being instructed to write fifty times, "I must not run in the corridors".

Unable to resist it the three others grinned wickedly, but, unfortunately, not unseen by Miss Ringer.

"As for you three girls," she remarked, rounding upon them, "you will do the same, only substitute 'It is a grievous fault to be unpunctual'. Indeed, I almost feel tempted to excuse Griselda on this occasion; you appeared to be triumphing over her so much in her misfortune, and that is a spirit I will not tolerate," and she frowned sternly on the trio.

"Er—shall I not do them, Miss Ringer?" queried Grizzy, in a voice of honeyed meekness.

"Don't waste any more time, Griselda," was the crisp retort. "Of course you will do them. I said 'almost tempted to excuse you', but I did not say I had succumbed. I am not surprised, from all the evidences I have of your inattention, that the niceties of the English tongue appear to be wasted on you."

"Yes, Miss Ringer," murmured Grizzy, looking slightly dazed as she followed the others to their seats.

A few moments later, when the form-mistress's head was bent over a pile of exercise books, Amanda seized the opportunity of slipping her a piece of paper:

"What do you think of the 'niceties of the English tongue'?" she read, to which Grizzy sadly appended, "I'd rather have the 'baddities'," and surreptitiously returned it.

Fortunately, for once, Miss Ringer did not raise her head at the critical moment, and Amanda was able to grin back sympathetically, unseen.

CHAPTER XIV

Annie brings a Message

"Good night, girls," said Miss Ringer, switching off the light.

"Good night, Miss Ringer," replied four voices, seemingly so overcome with sleep that the form-mistress smiled to herself. Not much evidence of riotous behaviour now among her four charges!

The closing of the door, however, had she still been on the inside of it, would have made her change her mind. In a twinkling the room's four occupants were out of bed and clustered round the window.

Grizzy cautiously drew the light curtains apart, and the pale moon shone down on their serious faces.

Hazel shivered. It was beautiful, but there was a cold heartlessness about it that accorded well with the despair which had possessed her ever since Miss Ringer's announcement.

"Here, put your quilt over your dressing-gown," said Grizzy, "and, anyhow, we'd all be better sitting on my bed than freezing to death over here—Golly!"

she broke off, as the springs creaked protestingly under the extra weight, "I'd forgotten about your ten stone, Brownie. For goodness' sake be careful. If we collapse with a bang it's all up with us."

"Down with us, you mean," giggled Brownie, snuggling deeper into her quilt with further groans from the spring mattress.

"Oh, let's get on," put in Amanda, "we'll have to make a plan—and quickly. Perhaps even we'll have to make for Clevedon to-night."

"To-night?" echoed Grizzy in dismay, but Hazel nodded with relief.

"Oh, I'd hoped you might agree to that," she exclaimed, "but I was afraid to say it. But what do you suggest we should do, Amanda?"

"Well"—there was a worried hesitancy in the usually gay voice—"the situation is like this: whatever we do must be done by Thursday at the latest. To-night is Monday, and there's very little of it left. To-morrow we ought to have had a half-holiday, but by the time we've written our lines, there'll be none of that left either, and, in any case, we've been forbidden to go out. So that leaves Wednesday and Thursday—and Thursday *is* a half-holiday, if we don't get into any more scrapes, that is."

"Oh, we daren't," said Grizzy, shuddering. "If I had to go to see the Head again I'd—I'd run off abroad with Hazel Warnford," she finished, laughing.

"But Hazel Warnford's not to be allowed to go abroad," protested the real Hazel desperately. "Amanda, can you not think of some way that we could get in touch with her?"

"Could you not just write to her in the ordinary way, Gaily?" asked Brownie. "I mean by post?"

"It would be no use," answered Amanda, before Hazel could reply. "Any letters for her would be read before she'd get them. You can see that by the trouble she took over sending that little newspaper cutting. She evidently couldn't risk posting it, or writing a note even to explain it. By the way, Gaily, are you not writing to that box number to find out what it's all about? I thought we had decided we should."

In the dim light Hazel shook her head.

"I know we did," she admitted, "but I worried about it all last night and I'm certain there must be something crooked or dangerous about it. In fact——" she hesitated, but Brownie gave her an impatient little push.

"Go on, Sherlock. In fact, what?" she urged.

"Well, I think it's quite likely to have been put in by Great-Uncle Herbert and Aunt Mildred themselves—they've been so terribly interested in everything about Hazel Warnford, though goodness knows why. But if we answered the advertisement, the fat would be in the fire with a vengeance."

Amanda gave a low whistle.

"That's certainly a brain-wave, Gaily, and I don't know but what you're right."

"But if you did write and it turned out to be them," interposed Brownie, "would it really matter? After all, they know that you did meet her—Hazel thin-gummy-bob, that is—and that you've told them all you know."

"Not quite," murmured the irrepressible part of Hazel's mind, but she did not interrupt.

"On the other hand," continued Brownie with a certain enjoyment—it was not often she was listened to so seriously—"if it's somebody else, you may be doing Hazel tremendous harm by not writing. If you sent off a note to-morrow morning, there could be an answer by Thursday. Do, Gaily, I've got a stamped envelope I can give you."

Despite the general tension they all laughed.

"Brownie can't bear the mystery not to be followed up," said Grizzy, "but I think she's right. Besides, if you just say 'Further information regarding Hazel Warnford may be had from Gaily More, St. Margaret's, Cheppingston' you're not giving anything away, and if it should be Great-Uncle Herbert and Aunt Mildred they'll probably not take any notice."

Put in that way the plan seemed feasible, though inwardly Hazel dreaded any further questioning from her so-called relatives at the Grange. However, as Grizzy put it, it might not do any harm.

"All right," she conceded, "I'll do it, and slip it into the post-box downstairs first thing in the morning. But"—once again her voice took on the despairing note—"what are we to do in the meantime? We're not getting on a bit further, and we seem to have been talking for hours."

"I—I think I have a plan," said Amanda slowly. "While you've been talking I've been thinking things out, and it seems to me we'll have to risk something pretty daring. What do you say to this?" and rapidly she outlined her scheme.

"So we can't do anything more to-night?" said

Brownie some ten minutes later, when Amanda had put them in possession of her ideas.

“No, nothing more to-night,” she agreed.

There was a general sigh of relief, and renewed creakings from the springs as the three others tiptoed back to their own beds.

“Goodness!” exclaimed Grizzy in a rueful whisper. “This mattress is like a weather chart, ‘Deep depression over Iceland’ and that sort of thing. I thought it was only Brownie who was ten stone.” But as the only answer to her exaggerated thumping and pom-melling was a chorus of gentle snores, she too settled down and silence reigned absolute in the moonlit dormitory.

Perhaps it was the moonlight—for Grizzy had forgotten to close the curtains—or perhaps it was that her mind was, even in sleep, turning over and over again the difficulties and perplexities in which she had so unexpectedly become involved. Whatever the reason, Hazel suddenly awoke to find herself listening with wildly beating heart—listening to what? What was it that had roused her? For, as consciousness swept over her once more, she knew that there was something—something different—something that was still trying to thrust itself on her sleep-befogged brain, and then it sounded again and she sat up in full wakefulness. That was it. Someone was tapping gently at the dormitory door!

It was a soft, persistent tapping, with only momentary pauses, a tapping that in a curious way seemed as frightened almost as frightening. Perhaps it was this impression that gave Hazel the courage to slip out of

bed and steal to the door on bare feet—resisting even the temptation to waken Amanda—but as she grasped the handle, her courage failed. Who could it be at this time of night? What if she were to open and find some fearsome figure—or worse still, were to find *nobody*, and yet the tapping to go on? Her fingers were sliding nervelessly from the knob as these possibilities flashed through her mind, when she became rigid with terror. Someone—the tapper presumably—was speaking, or rather whispering, and the door was being eased open from the corridor outside.

If—just in time—she had not caught the drift of the whispered words, Hazel felt she would have fainted on the spot, for her limbs had lost all power of movement, but some part of her intelligence must still have been working for, suddenly, the urgency of the whispering voice became clear to her.

“Miss More,” it kept repeating, “Miss Gaily More, are you awake? Please, Miss More, it’s just Annie, but I’ve a message for you.”

Annie? Dimly Hazel remembered one of the housemaids—a tall, pretty, dark girl—and with the recollection her fear vanished. Gently she pulled the door from her side, to be greeted by a smothered scream. Annie had not expected her to appear without warning. The scream banished any remnants of fear on Hazel’s part; her first surmise that the tapper had been as frightened as herself had been correct.

“Hush!” she cautioned. “What is it, Annie? What do you mean by coming here like this? It must be nearly midnight.”

“Oh, Miss More, you are Miss More, aren’t you?”

And Annie flashed a little torch on Hazel's face as she nodded.

"Oh, I'm so frightened, miss, and I would get into such trouble if I were caught, but I promised Thomas I'd give you the message, and I couldn't but try, but oh, miss, you must be a powerful heavy sleeper for I've been a-tapping at this door for hours."

Even Annie's whisper had a plaintive note in it, but Hazel brushed this aside.

"A message? From Thomas?" she queried. "What do you mean?"

"Yes, miss, Thomas—him that's gardener at Clevedon where Miss Hazel Warnford's been staying. Thomas and me have been walking out, miss—he's my boy-friend like"—and Annie gave a self-conscious giggle—"and he thinks the world of that Miss Hazel, though I've told him she's probably not a whit different from any of the young ladies here." Whether Annie was jealous of his admiration or was determined to stick up for the pupils of St. Margaret's, Hazel could not decide.

"Yes, yes," she whispered impatiently. "But what is the message? Is it about Hazel?"

"It's from her herself, miss, only she made Thomas promise to get me to deliver it, and what all the fuss is for, I'd like to know—just to tell you that Mrs. Archer is going to the Grange for dinner on Tuesday evening. As if a lady like that won't be out to dinner a dozen times a week," she concluded, with a fine disregard for the possible number of dinners likely to be packed into the normal seven days.

"And was that all?" asked Hazel, hardly able to

conceal her disappointment. "Just that Mrs. Archer was going to the Grange for dinner on Tuesday evening? Nothing else?"

"You may well ask, miss, for it's what I said to Thomas myself, but, mind you, it was only because it seemed that harmless and ordinary a message that I said I'd try to give you it, and it was only because he said Miss Hazel had made such a point of telling you at once that I risked coming to-night. Losh, miss, what's that?"

"That" proved to be nothing more than a loud snore from Brownie, but it served to bring Annie's rambling recital to an end. Downstairs a clock chimed twelve, and in a flutter she departed.

"Good night, miss, maybe the message means more to you than it does to me, but it would be as much as my place is worth if I were caught here," and without listening to Hazel's hastily breathed good night, she disappeared towards the servants' staircase.

Shivering with cold, for she had been standing all the time on the bare floor without her slippers, Hazel tiptoed back to bed to find, to her relief, that Amanda was sitting up in hers.

"What's the matter?" she demanded excitedly. "I woke up a minute ago to hear you whispering at the door. I was scared stiff for the moment till I realized it was you."

"Not half so scared as I was," answered Hazel, thankfully getting back into bed, and trying to control her chattering teeth. "And yet, when you hear it, I don't expect you'll see anything in it to be scared about—any more than I do." Hurriedly she described the

events of the past few minutes, ending with "and that's all. Do you make anything of it?"

"Of course," said Amanda without hesitation. "She's evidently afraid to give even Thomas a message that would arouse any suspicion, but it's as plain as a pikestaff what she's getting at."

"You mean—she wants us to do something while Mrs. Archer's away?" hazarded Hazel.

"Yes—in fact I think it's more desperate even than that. She wouldn't have gone to all that trouble to send such a simple-sounding message if it weren't terribly important to her. I think"—and Amanda's lowered voice became tense with excitement—"I think it means that to-morrow—goodness no, but to-day, for it's Tuesday already—is our only chance. I'm certain she's as good as telling us that."

Hazel's heart seemed to turn to lead within her. "To-day, Amanda?" she whispered back despondently. "What on earth can we do in such a short time?"

"I don't know yet, but we're going to do something," came the determined reply. "Only for goodness' sake go to sleep now—perhaps we'll have some inspiration in the morning."

"We'll need it——" Hazel was beginning, only to finish with a stupendous yawn. She hadn't realized till that moment how desperately sleepy she was.

Amanda was right—perhaps the morning would bring some new ideas—perhaps the—— But before she could proceed further with her cogitations, her head had sunk farther down on the pillows, and she was already asleep.

CHAPTER XV

Remarkable Behaviour of Miss Steading

"Oh, why did we have to be kept in this gorgeous afternoon?" groaned Brownie; "and I'm only at my two hundred and fifty-sixth line and my arm's simply aching with exhaustion."

"Wish your tongue was," retorted Amanda uncharitably. "I've gone and written 'I must never leave school without exhaustion' instead of 'without permission', and the Head will think I'm trying to be cheeky."

"And give you other five hundred to do," laughed Grizzly. "How are *you* enjoying your lines, Gaily?"

Hazel smiled ruefully. "'Exhaustion' is the word. I never dreamt five hundred lines——"

"——and fifty," reminded Amanda.

"Oh yes, and fifty for Miss Ringer could take such ages to do. It wouldn't be so bad though if it weren't for to-night——"

But Amanda broke in, "Don't think about it—to-night, I mean; just get ahead and finish these, and then we'll have tea in the study and concentrate *hard*."

"H'mph!" grunted Brownie, still writing furiously, "we've only a *wee wee* bit of hard cake to concentrate hard on—that won't help us much."

The truth of this cast them once more into a



depressed silence. For a few minutes nothing could be heard but the desperate scraping of pens and rustling of paper—fortunately for them, as it turned out.

Into this awe-inspiring quietness walked Miss Steading, and surveyed her seemingly much chastened pupils with considering eyes.

“Well,” she said at length, and four anxious faces gazed at her with quickened apprehension. What on earth was going to happen to them now? Later they admitted that not even in their wildest dreams could they have imagined the next developments.

“Well,” began the headmistress again, but this time the very tone foretold something strange. “Perhaps we might consider that this will be enough punishment. What do you think?”

Scarcely able to believe their ears, and wondering if they dared agree, they risked it.

“Oh yes, Miss Steading. Please, Miss Steading. Thank you, Miss Steading,” and then their faces fell as Amanda remembered.

“But we have all fifty lines to do for Miss Ringer, as well,” she announced dolefully.

Miss Steading looked properly disapproving.

“Dear me, in trouble with Miss Ringer too! However, in this instance I will ask her if she will accept fifty of those that you have written for me. Meantime I wish you to come along to my study. I have something to say to you. No, no!”—and this time her stern features relaxed into a genuine smile—“it’s not to be that sort of talk. Run along now and wash your hands. I’ll expect you in five minutes.”

Without waiting for the further chorus of puzzled

"Yes, Miss Steading", she swept out, leaving her four pupils in complete bewilderment.

"This," gasped Brownie, "takes the biscuit!"

"As long as it doesn't take our wee bit of cake it won't be so bad," remarked Grizzly.

"I wonder what it can be," murmured Hazel.

"Does she usually let you off punishments like this?"

"Never," affirmed Amanda, "it must have been your pathetic countenance, my child. But let's hurry up, and get it over. I'm simply gasping for tea. I do hope she doesn't keep us long."

This wish, as it happened, was destined never to be fulfilled. As they entered the headmistress's study, with again that slight sinking of heart which the precincts invariably produced, their eyes almost popped out of their heads with astonishment. No need for them now to worry about their stale and scanty remnants of cake—quite evidently they were being invited to tea.

"And what a spread!" as Brownie later expressed it.

"And what a difference in Miss Steading!" Amanda added.

It was true. Miss Steading welcomed and entertained them so delightfully that once again Brownie's comment summed it up: "You could hardly believe she was a headmistress."

Hot buttered toast, crumpets and jam, cake, chocolate biscuits—everything that they could possibly have imagined in their most extravagant fancies was pressed upon them, and their fears and apprehensions were joyously forgotten.

"But I knew it couldn't last," Amanda commented,

as they discussed it later. "I knew there must be a snag coming."

"And it did," said Grizzy, "but she was jolly decent about it, since Gaily was practically new to school—and, of course, it was just as much our fault too. We shouldn't have let her do it."

"Encouraged her to do it," admitted Brownie.

Hazel smiled. "I had no idea it was a crime when I dropped the famous letter into the post-box this morning. I simply wondered what Miss Steading was getting at when she put down her cup and looked at me."

"I know," sympathized Amanda, "with that sort of half-smile but 'I'm-going-to-get-to-the-bottom-of-this' kind of expression. I began to have a sinking feeling, too, as soon as she said, 'And now, Gaily, do you not know that pupils are strictly forbidden to write to *anyone*, apart from parents and guardians, without special permission?' None of us ever want to write letters except home, it's too much fag—so I'm afraid that's why we had forgotten all about that rule."

"Let's go over it again," pleaded Brownie, "not the rule, but what happened. I was so—so flabbergasted that honestly I haven't quite grasped things yet. Only we have learned something, haven't we?"

"Oh yes," responded Amanda in flippant tones, "we've learned not to be disobedient little girls again."

"Rot," said Grizzy before Brownie could answer, "you know that's not what she meant. It's that Miss Steading seems to have an oar in this business, too, of Hazel Warnford—or at least seems to be frightfully interested in it—doesn't she?"

Hazel interposed. "Let's go over it again, as Brownie suggested," she urged, and as the others nodded, she went on: "She knew quite well that I hadn't understood about the rule, for she didn't make any fuss. In fact, I'm certain if the letter had been to anybody else, I'd just have been—er——"

"Reprimanded?" supplied Brownie grandly.

"Exactly, and there would have been nothing more about it."

"Certainly no nice tea-party," agreed Grizzy.

"No," went on Hazel, "what she was really interested in was——"

"'Why were you writing, Gaily, to that box number in *The Times*?' " quoted Amanda sternly, ending with a laugh. "It rather took the feet from you, didn't it? All the same, you did jolly well—just saying that you had seen the advertisement and thought you'd better write and tell about meeting Hazel Warnford in the train, in case it would be of any use."

"I think she was disappointed," put in Brownie, "not to hear anything more sensational. It might have thrilled her a bit more if she'd known how we really came to see the advertisement."

"Yes, but thank goodness she didn't go into that. It was we who had the thrill when she said, 'Of course, your letter is not going but, as it happens, there's no need for it. I myself answered that advertisement a day or two ago, and had a reply this morning.' "

"I nearly forgot she was the Head at that point," said Grizzy. "You remember, she paused so long to let it sink in I wanted to shake her and say, 'Goodness, are you *never* going to tell us?' "

They all laughed.

"That's how I felt too," admitted Hazel, "except that I had a sick feeling in case she would say that it really was Great-Uncle Herbert and Aunt Mildred who had replied. The relief, when it wasn't, was just——"

"Tremenjus!" supplied Brownie obligingly again.

"Tut, tut, what slang expressions you have," said Amanda with mock disapproval. "But go on, Gaily, can you remember what name she *did* say?"

"No—indeed, I don't think she mentioned a name at all. She just said she had had an answer from a firm of solicitors and that a representative was to come down to see her to-morrow."

"And that she'll send for you to see him too?" queried Amanda.

Hazel nodded. "Yes, to tell him what I know. Oh dear!" and she looked round at them again. "What on earth are we to do? Everything this afternoon has been so exciting and unexpected, that it's made us forget to-night. But we'll have to carry on with your plan, Amanda, won't we? We *can't* let poor Hazel down."

"Do you think we do need to carry out the plan?" put in Grizzy. "If this solicitor comes to-morrow, would it not be better to tell him that we're sure Hazel Warnford is being kept practically a prisoner and that she's being taken off abroad when—when she certainly doesn't seem to want to go—and that there's just a frightful mystery about the whole thing? He may be able to explain it all anyway."

It was obvious from Grizzy's eloquence that she had

no particular liking for their plan for the night, but Hazel stood her ground and to her relief Amanda supported her.

"To-morrow will be too late," she affirmed. "You know we agreed that that was what Annie's message meant. We'll have to do it, Grizzy, though I hate to drag you into it," and she looked at them all pleadingly.

"Rubbish!" said Amanda briskly. "Of course, we're carrying on. Come on, let's get down to it again so that we'll have everything cut and dried. It'll soon be prep and we'll have no chance to do any more discussing."

"Anyhow," put in Brownie brightly, "things have gone so marvellously to-day that they *can't* go wrong now. We're going to rescue Hazel Warnford in spite of everybody and everything. So cheer up, Gaily, and don't look so doleful!"

Hazel smiled at her gratefully, but could not repress a shiver. If only she could be sure that Brownie's optimism would be justified!

CHAPTER XVI

Adventure at Clevedon

In the darkness they clutched each other's hands and cowered back into the shadow—just in time. Out from the very gateway of Clevedon swept the dazzling headlights of a car, illuminating the hedges and trees

on the opposite side of the road with the brilliance of searchlights, and for the moment discovery seemed inevitable. Then—with sighs of relief, they saw the long, dark shape swing left and glide smoothly away from them.

“Towards the Grange,” murmured Amanda speculatively.

Hazel clutched her arm in renewed distress.

“What if it was the Grange car—and I think it looked quite like it. It must have been bringing Mrs. Archer back!”

“Then—we’ll be too late after all?” hesitated Brownie.

But Amanda was not going to be deterred.

“Listen,” she addressed them, as they still stood irresolutely by the gate, “we must carry on as if we hadn’t seen that car. We haven’t taken all this risk of slipping out from the dormitory just to go back to school without attempting anything. Besides, I don’t believe Mrs. Archer would be back so early—it’s not much more than half-past nine, for we slipped out the minute Bells switched off the light. That car might have been anybody’s at all. We’re simply letting our imaginations run away with us. Come on!” and she led the way.

“Stout fella!” murmured Grizzy, who, now that she was embarked on the adventure, had quite recovered her nerve.

“Tough guy!” approved Brownie, almost in the same breath and, slipping her arm through Hazel’s, laughingly encouraged her.

“Come on, Gaily. The dauntless quartette will now

show the world. Just let anyone try to stop us from rescuing your little pal, Hazel, and—oh boy!—won't they be sorry!"

The gay words did them all good. With light, eager steps they made their way up the short drive—so different from the long eerie approach to the Grange—and now the darkness, which previously had been rather terrifying, seemed to bring a feeling of comfort and protection.

The front of the house was practically in darkness. From the hall a faint light showed through the glass of the door, but either the windows were heavily curtained or else no room was in use, for nowhere else was there a sign of brightness.

They sighed with relief—Hazel especially.

"It couldn't have been Mrs. Archer," she whispered, "in the car, I mean. The house looks absolutely 'not-at-home', doesn't it?"

Amanda laughed softly at the description. "Yes, except for Hazel Warnford, I hope. Round to the right for her room, isn't it, Brownie? This is where our last visit comes in useful."

"Hope we don't meet Thomas," assented Brownie cheerfully, to break off with "Good! We're all right for Hazel anyhow. She doesn't believe in drawing curtains, thank goodness!"

From a window on the second floor, round to the right of the house, light streamed forth, and as they crept towards it they saw that the sash was open to its widest extent.

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Grizzy in an ecstatic whisper. "She must be expecting us."

Relief flooded over them as Amanda deftly threw a small pebble up through the lighted aperture.

"Thought she might have been looking out," she whispered, "but that'll bring her."

From inside the room they heard the soft "plop" of the pebble landing, and they waited excitedly. Surely now that everything had gone so easily they would soon have accomplished this part of their adventure? Surely—but even as their minds formulated the thought, a chill feeling of dread crept in. The seconds passed into a minute—two minutes—and at the lighted window nobody appeared. Nothing but silence—a tense, terrifying silence, increased in eeriness by the untroubled serenity of the lighted window, and the faint fluttering of the silk curtains which they could now discern drawn wide apart, and moving gently in the cold night breeze.

Hazel could bear it no longer.

"I'm going to climb up and see," she whispered and moved desperately forward.

"You can't possibly. There's not a rone pipe, or ivy or anything, to give you the slightest help," and Amanda stayed her, holding her arm.

Hazel wrenched herself free. "I must," she declared almost hysterically. "I've *got* to find her; I *must*."

How the argument would have developed was never to be known for, at that moment, a sound, fraught with terror to them all, smote their ears: the heavy lumbering steps and muttering undertones of the gardener Thomas! He too was approaching from the front of the house—from the very point from which they them-

selves had come. Already, in snatches, they could hear his mumblings.

"If it be them young varmint's again . . . I warrant I'll . . . my name be 'ant Thomas if . . ."

They waited to hear no more, but took to their heels and fled—perforce to the back of the house as Amanda and Brownie had done on their previous terrifying visit.

They fled—except Hazel. Later she could never decide whether it was sheer funk or desperate bravery which kept her rooted where she was—she suspected the former—but stay she did, powerless to move, and in the darkness Thomas crashed past her, unseeing, in hot pursuit of the other three.

It seemed unbelievable, and for the moment her head swam with relief and panic combined, and then—it was as if her mind took possession of her, and almost she could hear it dictating: You can't climb up the wall, but why not try to slip in by that lower window, and make your way up from inside?

Whatever the cause, she found herself with the utmost coolness trying the sash of the window beside her. To her amazement it went up without the slightest difficulty—only for her to start back in a cold sweat of terror. A burglar alarm? She listened for the wild jangle of bells that had so startled her and Grizzly at the Grange, but as the seconds passed, and the silence remained unbroken, she breathed again. Next moment she had hoisted herself over the sill and was in the room.

Once again she stood rigid—listening—but no, not a sound. Thomas and the others had long since

vanished from earshot. Now her eyes were growing accustomed to the darkness, and the faintest suspicion of light on the farther side indicated the door. Moving stealthily, feeling with hands outstretched in case of knocking into any obstacles, she gradually made her way across the room and groped for the door knob. With it in her grasp she paused, with a renewal of her wild panic. What if she opened the door to find herself confronted by somebody—one of the servants perhaps—perhaps not just one but two or three—perhaps even Mrs. Archer herself? And to her mind's eye leapt a sudden picture of that compelling face with its thin mouth and close-set, penetrating eyes.

She shuddered, but at the same time, obeying the urgency of that strange determination which had beset her, turned the knob, and stepped out into the softly lit and thickly carpeted hall. Not a soul was to be seen, but distantly from behind a baize door far back, she could hear a faint murmur of voices, and an occasional burst of laughter. All was well. Obviously the servants had no suspicions of anything unusual happening.

She stepped silently across the hallway and almost ran, in her eagerness, up the wide staircase to the floor above. Her mind worked feverishly to visualize her bearings, but there was no need for her to puzzle unduly. As she reached the landing and turned left she saw that her surmise had been correct. The bedroom—Gaily More's room—was where she had decided it would be, but once again chill dread descended upon her, and it needed only a second's scrutiny to confirm her worst fears: the door stood wide open, the electric

lights were blazing, the curtains fluttering in the breeze as they had seen them from below, but of Gaily More herself not a sign. Or was there not? A sign of haste—a sign of struggle? Perhaps, or perhaps again her imagination was running away with her, but the heavy rug which covered most of the polished floor was all askew, and surely—yes, a chair was lying overturned on its side.

No doubt about it—something—or somebody—had caused Gaily More to leave in a hurry—to leave unwillingly—for as she looked around she saw further signs of upset: an open book lying face downwards on the floor, a slipper over by the fireplace with its neighbour—where?

Automatically Hazel turned to look for the companion shoe, and at the same time the light was switched out and a cry of terror escaped her—to be stifled before it was uttered. Behind her a shape had loomed up, a dark, vaguely familiar figure, but she saw no more. A hand was thrust over her mouth, choking the wild cries which she struggled to utter and reducing her frantic struggles to impotence and then—complete and utter darkness as she fell, or was pushed, against some obstacle of furniture, striking her head with a sickening thud, and crashing into insensibility.

How long she remained unconscious she had no idea, but gradually awareness began to sweep over her—awareness of pain in her aching head, of dryness and thickness in her tongue and throat, of constriction round her hands and feet—and with this thought her returning senses caused her to struggle to pull herself

up out of the blackness which had engulfed her—only to sink back with a groan: hands and feet were securely tied, and a scarf too had been bound around her mouth. She blinked her eyes, and found that at least she had not been blindfolded, but at the moment sight was of little use to her in what appeared to be pitch and impenetrable darkness.

Waves of sick realization seethed over her, and oddly enough, despite her own desperate plight, the uppermost thought was that they had been too late to rescue Gaily More—Gaily More, in her character of Hazel Warnford. As she struggled sickly and ineffectually with her bonds, she kept asking herself over and over again: What, *what* mystery could it be that had so suddenly arisen around Hazel Warnford—mystery that seemed to stop at nothing—kidnapping, danger, anything at all, and poor Gaily More, by their absurd exchange, was suffering the whole brunt of it? What *could* it be? Her thoughts, in these few waking moments, ranged back over her own quiet uneventful life. All those years that she had lived in the country with her nurse, nobody had shown the slightest interest in her, nor had her nurse ever hinted at the existence of any mysterious circumstances whatever. And then, when she had been told she was to be sent to St. Margaret's after her old nurse died, hadn't that Mr. Golding just seemed as if he couldn't be rid of her quickly enough? That Mr. Golding——?

With a sudden gasp she felt something click in her mind, and she was back in memory in Gaily More's bedroom. Once more, as the light had been switched out, she saw the dark shape that had 'loomed up

behind her, and that somehow had seemed vaguely familiar. That was why! Short as the moment of seeing him had been, she felt sure her assailant had been none other than Mr. Golding who had seemed not to want to be bothered with her, and who had merely sent his typist to see her off at the station.

Why all this change now? More than ever the mystery became insoluble, and her own helplessness added to her distress.

Frantically she attacked her bonds again, to desist exhausted in a few moments and to peer around her in the gloom. Was she right in thinking that the darkness was a little less intense, or was it just that her eyes were growing accustomed to it? Oh, if only she could see, and learn where she was, she might find some clue! For that she had been shifted from the room at Clevedon she felt certain. The hardness and roughness of the floor where she lay indicated that, but in no way else could she glean any help.

Suddenly she stiffened. Was it imagination, or had she heard a sound? Scarcely daring to breathe she listened. Yes—there it was again. A scratching? A tapping? Groping, stealthy movement? Sick with terror she tried to convince herself that there was nobody, or nothing, but in vain, for next moment unmistakably the vague sounds merged into a whisper. "Are you there?" breathed the mysterious voice. "Are you there?"

CHAPTER XVII

Terror by Night

In the few seconds between the hearing of that vague whisper and the making up of her mind to answer, Hazel seemed to live through an eternity of terror.

Who could it be that was moving so stealthily about her prison—wherever that prison might be? That whispered merely “Are you there?”—for had it been Grizzy or one of the others they would have been calling her by name. Who *could* it be? But it was no use surmising, and still the urgent tapping and whispering were going on. Wildly Hazel decided to take the risk.

“Yes,” she breathed, only to realize with a shock of remembrance that she was gagged. But now, having made up her mind, she was determined somehow to communicate with the presence outside.

Raising her bound feet she tried to knock on the floor but with no success. For their adventure that night they had all put on soft, rubber-soled shoes, which now made only a faint “thud” when brought down against the boards, and despair seized her. Whereas at first she had been terrified of the whispering voice, now it seemed absolutely imperative that she should let its owner know that she was indeed within.

Wriggling with all her strength she rolled over and over till, with a gasp of relief, she came to a wall. And

now the only thing to do was to knock against it with her head, and hope that the impacts might be heard from outside.

Almost screaming with the pain—if any scream could have been heard through the tight scarf sealing her lips—she bumped her already aching head against the hard surface, stopping every few moments to listen if she had been heard. She had. A kind of sixth sense told her that whoever was outside was listening, and next moment the whisper confirmed it.

“I hear you. Can you not speak?”

Hazel gave two answering bumps which appeared to be understood.

“Right. I’ll have this door open in no time. Cheer up!”

It was impossible to identify the voice—except that it was not Grizzly’s or Amanda’s or Brownie’s—but wonderfully heartening to hear the fumbling at the door, followed by—oh, blessed relief!—a shaft of light, as a torch shone through the opening.

“Oh, you poor kid!” came in low, excited tones, as the light showed up the captive’s huddled form, and once again Hazel’s mind went back to Mr. Golding and that day, which seemed so far off now, when she had left for school. She saw again the typist’s face smiling up at her from the station platform and now—yes, it was that self-same face bending over her, no longer smiling perfunctorily, as she recalled it, but with a grim, set look mingling with the pity in her eyes.

“You poor kid,” she murmured again, busying herself with Hazel’s bonds. “I was sure he had put you in here.”

By this time the gag was off and Hazel's dry throat tried to croak its questions.

"How——?" she was beginning, but the other cut her short.

"Don't ask anything just now. We'll have to hurry, for he may be back any moment. Let's just hope though that he means to leave you here till morning."

"Mr. Golding?" queried Hazel despite the injunction. "Is it still dark?"

"Yes—to both questions," was the answer; "but now, do you think you could manage to walk? That's the last knot loosened, and the sooner we're away from here the better."

"Here", as the torch-light swept around, proved to be nothing more or less than the laundry of a private house. With a shock Hazel realized that she was probably still at Clevedon, and a further question, as she struggled dizzily to her feet, confirmed this.

"Of course. Where did you think you were? But perhaps——"

What she was going to say remained unfinished for, at that moment, the sound of a car stopping outside galvanized them into action.

"Quick!" gasped her rescuer and looked frantically around. There was nowhere for them to hide, unless perhaps in the big copper boiler, but at the farther end there was a door, and almost dragging the still dazed Hazel, she pushed her through. Just in time. Heavy footsteps were already entering as they gently drew the door to behind them, and frenziedly took stock of their own position.

They were in a short, dark passage, but the faint

flicker that they had allowed themselves of the torch had disclosed a door at each end. From behind the inner one came sounds of voices—presumably it led to the kitchen quarters, and automatically they tiptoed towards the farther end. For once fortune was kind. It was merely a matter of seconds since they had escaped from the laundry, and the heavy footsteps could still be heard moving about, as if their owner were searching in every corner. Even as they reached the door, they heard the great lid being lifted from the copper. Thank goodness they had not hidden *there* at any rate, and yes—thank goodness the door which they were now trying opened with the slightest turn of the handle and—oh joy—in a second they were out in the open air!

They stepped forth into a blaze of light, and blinked stupidly, only to realize they were in the full glare of a car's headlights. In a panic they cowered back but nothing happened, and next moment the little typist gave a subdued chuckle.

"What luck! It's Mr. Golding's car. We've just come out abreast of the laundry. Come on—I've driven it often—if we take the car he can't follow us."

There was nothing left for Hazel to do but agree. Breathlessly they tiptoed over and bundled themselves in, expecting every moment to be stopped, but no! The engine had been left running, showing that Mr. Golding—if it really were he—had not intended to be long away—and in less time than it takes to tell they had made a swift turn and were gliding smoothly round towards the front of the house and down the drive.

A loud shout had followed them, and Hazel, glancing

back, had faintly discerned a figure waving frantically, but it was immediately lost in the gloom. As they turned out of the gate she saw the moon still low on the eastern horizon, and realized that the recent crowded events, which seemed to have occupied a lifetime, had taken up not much more than an hour.

With the thought everything came sweeping back to her: where were Amanda and the others? Had Thomas captured them, or, if he hadn't, why had they not come back to look for her? And where too was Gaily More? But—most pressing of all—where was she going now? For the car, having reached the roadway, was in no way slackening speed.

Timidly she touched the typist's nearer arm.

"Are you taking me to the Grange?" she asked anxiously, but even as she spoke, they whizzed past the entrance, and her companion bent doggedly over the wheel, apparently unaware of her question.

"Please—*where* are you taking me? We're going the wrong way. Please—won't you turn and take me back to school?" For all at once St. Margaret's appeared to her mind as a veritable haven of safety.

But the strange events of that amazing night were still not over. For a moment her companion slowed down, and turned to look at her; it was not a pleasant look, nor was it a pleasant laugh that followed it.

"You poor little sap! Do you think I went to all that trouble to double-cross Mr. Golding just to take you back to school? You mean a lot to him, but you mean just as much to me, so stay quiet and don't bother me," and with her nearer hand she pushed the stupefied Hazel roughly back into her seat.

But Hazel's blood was up. As always, in moments of hopeless despair, a something within her of dour determination came to her aid. The same coolness that had stood her in such good stead in recent crises at the Grange now took possession of her and, while she cowered back in her seat in pretended helplessness, her brain was working furiously.

Oddly enough too there was a feeling of plain indignation seething within her: Great-Uncle Herbert, Aunt Mildred, Mrs. Archer, even Mr. Golding, the most recent character to figure in the mystery, all seemed reasonable opponents—though what they had to “oppose” her for she had no earthly idea, but for this girl, this typist, not much taller and certainly not more than ten years older than herself, to trick her in this abominable fashion was not to be borne. By hook or by crook, Hazel determined she would get out of *her* clutches. Her chance came sooner than she expected.

It was plain from the other's attitude that she definitely considered her to be “the poor sap” she had applied to her, for she paid no further attention, and Hazel did everything to give the impression of utter dispiritedness. All the time, however, her hand was gently easing the door handle—she had discovered by experiment that it opened away from her—and now she lay huddled in her corner with the door ready to swing wide if only the car were forced to slow down even for a moment.

At that time of night, alas, there was so little traffic that it looked as if it would never be necessary to slacken speed, as if they would just go on, and on, and

then—suddenly, it happened. There was a loud explosion, the car staggered across the road, the girl jammed on her brakes, and the motor made a complete spin round, to end up by burying its nose gently in a ditch. A tyre had blown out. How Hazel had managed to keep her seat until then she did not know—except that the swing of the vehicle had all been away from her, but now with the car tilted upwards and sideways, she still had her door open, and it was the work of a moment to leap out. She took one glance at her companion: she had evidently been stunned, and lay limply over the wheel, but even as Hazel looked, she began to move and raise herself. At the same moment there came the sound of another car approaching. With a swift decision Hazel slipped off into the darkness at the far side. She had no mind meantime for explanations—even if she could now bring herself to trust anybody after the experiences she had been through.

She waited long enough to see the other car draw up, and to hear excited voices, among them her detested companion's quite distinctly inquiring if they did not see a young girl anywhere about; she lingered no longer.

Shaking with the shock and panic of the past few minutes, she climbed over a fence which bordered her side of the road, and plunged blindly into what appeared to be a dense coppice. At any other time she would have been panic-stricken at the thought of wandering alone in a thick wood even in the daytime, but now her whole being was concentrated on escaping as far as possible from her treacherous companion. On and

on she floundered, stopping every now and again to listen for signs of pursuit, and starting in terror as a frightened bird fluttered up at her approach, or some little wild creature rustled off in a flurry. Finally, her foot caught in a tangle of fern and she sprawled head-long, almost sobbing with exhaustion and fear. Afraid to move, she listened. All was quiet except for the almost imperceptible rustling of leaves and grasses. She moved her foot, dreading to find that she had twisted her ankle in her fall, but with a sigh of relief found she could stand without difficulty. She rose slowly to her feet once more, and leant heavily against a tree. All the calmness which had helped her through till now, for the moment had departed.

Here she was, in the heart of a dense wood, where hardly a flicker of moonlight was penetrating—alone, friendless, penniless, and miles away from school. Would she ever get back there? Would she ever be clear of this tangled web of mystery and treachery that had woven itself so inexplicably around her? The faint chirp of a night-bird was her only answer, as she stared helplessly into the darkness of the surrounding trees.

CHAPTER XVIII

Grizzy to the Rescue

It seemed to Hazel during those few moments in the darkness that she had touched the lowest possible depths of despair, but it was nothing to the sheer

frenzy of terror that succeeded, when the surrounding trees appeared to echo from all quarters the noise of some heavy body pushing and thrusting its way ever nearer and nearer to her hiding-place. All reasonableness of thought deserted her. Forgetting that she was, after all, in the heart of England, she visualized some fierce prowling creature of the jungle, or even worse, some of the prehistoric monsters about which, unfortunately, Miss Ringer had been discoursing realistically in their last history lesson. She clutched the tree on which she had been leaning, and wondered if she could possibly clamber up it—or would that be worse and worse if the beast managed to pursue her into the heights? Oh, where could she go? Even that hateful typist would have been better than this.

Already in desperation she was up among the lower branches when her heart momentarily stood still: the crashing progress was still continuing, but now it had taken voice, and as her panic-deafened ears gradually resolved the first terrifying sounds into sense, she half fell, half slipped down the trunk, yelling at the pitch of her own lungs:

“ I’m here, Grizzy, I’m here!”

Next moment she and Griselda were hugging each other in an ecstasy of relief and thankfulness.

“ Oh, Grizzy, I thought you were a brontosaurus,” she sobbed.

“ After I’ve risked my life to find you!” and Grizzy gave a chuckle. “ If you called your friend in the car any kind of monster with a sixteen syllable name I’d back you up every time, but me——!” and she broke off laughing.

"In the car," repeated Hazel; "how did you know about that?"

"Mutt!" retorted the other cheerfully. "How do you think I'm here at all if I didn't come in the car? My child, I was lying shivering in the back seat when you and your friend did that double-quick dive in. I was never so thankful to see anybody in my life as you, and I was just going to pop up and give you both a nice surprise when I thought I'd wait till we were clear away, and *that*," she commented complacently, "was an inspiration if ever there was one."

"Goodness yes," agreed Hazel; "but how——?"

"Well, as I say, I was just making ready to do my Jack-in-the-box stuff and to say 'How do you do? It's me!' when your charming friend said *her* nice little piece and I—er—decided to stay in my box a little longer, and if you hadn't been so slick with that door I'd have been beautifully caught when the tyre blew out and we did that gorgeous spin round. Gosh! I thought my last moment had come—I didn't know at first whether I was still on the seat or on the roof."

"And where were you?" queried Hazel idiotically.

"Neither. On the floor! And my head felt about twice the size—it still does. It's got a tremendous bump if you could just see it," she added proudly.

Hazel rose to the occasion. "It must have enlarged your bump of intelligence, for I still don't know how you managed to find me here."

Grizzy laughed. "Was that a compliment? Anyhow, brains did it. I was aware of your jumping out but for the moment I was so stunned I couldn't move,

or speak, or anything. And then I heard another car drawing up, and your dear friend beginning to groan, and I decided it was time I was making myself scarce before any questions were asked. That bit wasn't so easy either; for she began to babble about you, asking if they'd seen you, and, of course, they poked around a bit, but fortunately didn't look in the back. Or rather, they were just going to, when she flopped off unconscious again, and they were so busy looking after her that I slid out and crawled across the road without being noticed."

"But how did you know I'd be in this wood?"

"Brains again. No, of course I couldn't be sure but I was pretty certain that you wouldn't keep to the main road, and therefore this was the likeliest place; but *was* I getting hot and bothered after a bit when I shouted and shouted and there was no answer? I can tell you I was thankful to hear you, even though it was to be called a prehistoric beastie."

Hazel laughed. "You did make a frightful noise," she said, "but thank goodness for it. I never was so overjoyed in my life as when I realized it was you. Oh, Grizzy, I've got such heaps to ask you, only, what are we going to do now?"

"I know what I'd like to do," was the rueful answer; "I'm so hungry I could eat your bronto—whatever-you-called-it, and ask for more. You don't happen to be carrying a six-course dinner about with you by any chance, do you?"

Hazel groaned. "I wish you hadn't mentioned it. I'm simply starving too, only I didn't know till you said it. But look—it's getting clearer—we must be

coming to the edge of the wood, for the moonlight is showing through the trees."

It was true. All the time they had been talking, they had been pushing forward, urged on by the unspoken thought of getting as far from their recent companion as possible. It seemed unlikely, from Grizzy's description, that she would have been able to follow them—or rather Hazel, for of the other's presence fortunately she had been blissfully unaware—but there was just a chance that she had recovered sufficiently to give the occupants of the other car some plausible story which would have set them on the trail.

"Anyhow," said Grizzy, putting their thoughts into words, "we're better on this side of the wood for the time being, but I wonder where it's going to land us?"

She had not to wonder long. Even as she spoke they reached the encircling fence, and saw that a road ran along that way too. On the far side of it lay the low white buildings of a farmhouse.

They climbed over, and gazed longingly across at the steading.

"Eggs and milk," murmured Grizzy.

"Butter and scones," added Hazel.

"Yes—and barking dogs, and clucking hens——"

"*And* 'mooring' cows, and whinnying horses——"

They broke off this doleful recitation as a dog's sharp yelp sounded from the sleeping buildings as if in confirmation of their fears. They waited for nothing further but sped off down the road as though the whole farmyard were in pursuit.

"I must have a rest," panted Hazel; "do you always run as fast as that, Grizzy?"

"Why, I've been trying to keep up with you," she replied, thankfully slowing to a walk. "Besides, I've a horrible feeling that we're just going in a circle. I'm certain this is merely a farm track, and we're probably just making for the main road—although it's bound to be a good deal farther down than where we left it. Don't you think so?"

Hazel sighed. "Let's sit down by the fence then for a while," she suggested. "At least that run has warmed us up. And what about telling me the rest of your story? What happened to Brownie and Amanda? And how *did* you come to be in Mr. Golding's car? I'm dying to know and it will help to pass the time till we can find some way of getting back to school."

In spite of her dejection Grizzy chuckled. "Can't say I'm altogether looking forward to that part of it—going back to school, I mean. Just think what it's going to be like, explaining to Miss Steading!"

"Well, tell me, anyhow," said Hazel, playing up to the other's laughing tones. "It looks as if we're going to have plenty of time to concoct explanations before we do get back to St. Margaret's. We seem to be at the very back of beyond here."

"We'll be wishing we were at the 'backer of beyonder' when it comes to the interview. Your friend, Hazel Warnford, has landed us all in a ghastly mess, Gaily."

Hazel felt a spasm of guilt, but there was nothing to be done about that meantime. "If only we had found her," she said sadly. "You didn't, I suppose?" she added in pretended raillery.

"Well, I don't know," retorted Grizzy calmly. "I shouldn't be surprised if Amanda and Brownie have by this time—but I'd better begin at the beginning."

She was silent for a moment as if marshalling her thoughts.

"There isn't really such a lot to tell," she said at last, "apart from what you already know. We bolted when we heard Thomas, and it was quite a while before it dawned on us that you weren't there too. That was about the worst shock we had, and we couldn't at the moment do anything about it for it was taking us all our time to keep out of Thomas's clutches. You've no idea how that man can run—and he sounds as heavy as an elephant."

"Well, so did you," said Hazel tactlessly, "it must be the darkness."

"H'm, he's not just what you'd call sylph-like even in the daytime, but maybe you'll be telling me I'm not either. At any rate it was only because we had a better idea of the place, with being there before, that we managed to escape at all. And then Amanda had a brain-wave: she decided we'd better do the attacking——"

"What—attack Thomas?" interrupted Hazel incredulously.

"Oh, not a real attack. Low cunning, you know. Amanda said she'd read it was the 'best line of defence', and that we should separate, and keep Thomas on the hop. It was lovely!" and Grizzy chuckled reminiscently.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing very much. Just kept whispering

‘Thomas! Thomas!’ from different directions. He would be making a wild rush towards the one voice, when he would hear ‘Thomas! Thomas!’ from somewhere else, and then, before he had gone a step in that direction, he’d hear it behind him, and so on. You should have heard him after a bit. I think he was growing thoroughly scared.

“ ‘Dang it! I be bewitched I be. I thought it were them young varmints again, but it be ferlies for sure,’ and he began wailing about ‘Poor Thomas! What be I to do now? Under a spell I be. Poor ‘Thomas’ll never be the same again!’ ”

Despite their cold and hunger and general misery, Hazel began to laugh helplessly. Grizzy’s imitation was masterly and she could see the uncouth gardener in his unhappy bewilderment. Trust Amanda to think of a way out!

“It’s all very well to laugh,” wheezed Grizzy, who was herself overcome with mirth at the recollection, “but we were too worried at the time to be amused, and you must remember, of course, that we were all separated from each other. That was what gave me the idea to slip back and look for you—we seemed to have Thomas not knowing whether he was on his head or his heels, and I felt the other two could carry on for a while without me. I hope they managed it, for just as I slipped off, Amanda had another brain-wave.

“ ‘Thomas,’ I heard her calling in a grim, meant-to-be-terrifying voice, and I expect it terrified him all right, he was so completely dithered already. ‘Thomas, what have you done with Miss Hazel? Answer, Thomas, or it will be the worse for you.’ Unfor-

tunately," proceeded Grizzy, still laughing, "I couldn't wait to hear the answer, but that's why I said they may have discovered Hazel by now, for I'm sure if Thomas knew anything he'd 'spill the beans' right away."

"Oh," said Hazel, and try as she would she could not keep the disappointment out of her voice, "I thought—I hoped——"

"That I knew something definite," finished Grizzy contritely. "I'm sorry, but, you know, they *may* have discovered her, and at the time I was much more worried about you."

"You're a dear, Grizzy," responded Hazel warmly; "it was terribly brave of you to go back. Tell me about it."

"Oh, I only did my duty!" murmured Grizzy in mock-heroic tones, evidently quite overcome by this praise. "Actually there was nothing very brave about what I did—it was just a marvellous piece of luck that things have turned out as they have—not that we're in a particularly pleasant position," she added, with a return to her usual humour.

"No, but it would have been much worse for me if you weren't with me. Did you see Mr. Golding—or what?"

"I did see him—back view of course—and I hadn't the foggiest idea who he was. I was just skipping down when I heard a car, and naturally stopped skipping on the dot, to see where it was going. Fortunately it stopped, and I crept nearer and saw that it was at the back of the house, and I was just in time to notice a figure getting out of it and disappearing through one

of the back doors. I don't know whether it was inspiration or just plain curiosity, but I thought I'd better have a look too. I wanted to see if I could peep through the door where he had gone in. However, I was in the very act of easing the handle round when I heard a noise, looked wildly for somewhere to hide, could see only the car and, acting on impulse, as they say in books, I slipped into the back and lay flat on the seat, quaking like a jelly and absolutely mad with myself for doing anything so idiotic. Then, when the front doors were yanked open almost immediately, and you and your friend flopped in and we started whizzing down the drive, I felt if ever there had been an idiot I was the super one, until I heard you speaking. I could have hit the roof for joy!"

"You hit it soon enough!" remarked Hazel, laughing.

"Goodness, yes. I'd almost forgotten my bump. It's still there—I expect I'll be black and blue all over my face to-morrow when it's light enough to see. Maybe it'll soften the Head's heart when she sees me looking so pathetic and all my beauty departed."

"It might——" Hazel was beginning dubiously, when the other clutched her arm.

"Sh'h'h! Do you hear anything?"

But there was no need to strain their ears to listen, for unmistakably, along the road by which they themselves had come, they could now hear the trundling, rattling progress of some heavy motor vehicle.

"A milk van?" gasped Hazel.

"Yes, from the farm. This is where we get busy. Come on."

There was no time to demur. Noisily the heavy vehicle rattled down towards them as they crouched in the shadow of the hedge.

"Hope there's room to grip on to at the back," murmured Grizzy. "We'll have to try anyway. It'll make all the difference to get a lift. Now for it! Cheers! Are you all right, Gaily?"

Poor Hazel, hanging on grimly with hands and elbows, but with legs still dangling a short distance from the ground, was hard put to it to answer.

"Ye—yes," she gasped, trying to edge herself up still farther, but without much success, "I—I think I'll manage to hold on—if—if I don't fall off," she concluded inanely.

In spite of her own precarious grip, Griselda chuckled.

"Hold tight," she admonished. "There's plenty of room. I'll be right on in a minute, and then I'll have you up in a jiff."

No sooner said than done.

"Oh," breathed Hazel thankfully, "I never thought milk cans could be so comforting," and she leaned back against the great containers with which the lorry was filled.

Grizzy's mind, however, was busy working ahead.

"We must watch for the road junction," she whispered. "Unless he turns back towards school, we'll have to jump off, but I've an idea he'll be making for the station to put this stuff on the early train, and if so we'll be all right."

"The station?"

"Yes—it's very small, not much more than a goods



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"IMAGINE HAVING TO CLEAN AND POLISH BEFORE YOU'RE
PROPERLY AWAKE!"

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halt, but I'm sure it's somewhere about. 'New Broomsley' it's called, I think."

" 'Sweeps cleanly!' " murmured Hazel automatically, only to clutch frantically at the nearest milk can as the lorry swung round. By a miracle they managed to cling on.

" That nearly swept *us* cleanly off anyhow," whispered Grizzy with an attempt at a laugh, " but we're in luck. We're going in the right direction. Before we know where we are, we'll be half-way back to school."

" Grizzy," put in Hazel earnestly, " I've been thinking—I don't want to go back to school."

" Neither do I," agreed her companion wholeheartedly, but Hazel went on impatiently:

" No, no, I don't mean that! I mean I don't want to go back before we've done everything possible about—about Hazel Warnford."

" But what more *can* we do?"

" We can go back to the Grange and see if she's there. I've been thinking, and thinking, and I shouldn't be a bit surprised if that *was* the Grange car we saw last night just leaving Clevedon—you remember? And if it was, then I think Hazel Warnford was in it."

" With Mrs. Archer, do you mean?"

" No, but being kidnapped by Great-Uncle Herbert, while Mrs. Archer was safely visiting them. Aunt Mildred could be keeping her entertained, and the whole thing wouldn't take him more than a quarter of an hour. Don't you think it's possible?"

Griselda was spared the necessity of replying by another sudden lurch of their conveyance. As it turned, it slowed.

“Quick—now’s our chance. Hop off!” she urged, suiting her own actions to the words and half lifting, half dragging the slower Hazel after her. Next moment they were rolling over and over on the ground, but unscathed.

Grizzy recovered first.

“At least that’ll have ironed out the creases,” she remarked irrepressibly as she helped Hazel to her feet. “I’m sure we’ll both have maps of milk-cans down our backs. I never felt anything so hard in all my life—thankful though I was for the lift. And now, Cap’n, what’s it to be—school, or the Grange? I’m simply ravenous,” she added disconnectedly.

Hazel managed a laugh.

“The Grange then by all means. We’ll probably arrive in nice time for breakfast. And goodness,” she concluded with as much feeling as her companion, “I certainly could be doing with it too!”

CHAPTER XIX

Great-Uncle Herbert loses his Temper

“To think that it’s not quite to-day even yet,” said Griselda, as they trudged wearily up the long drive to the Grange.

It took Hazel a moment to grasp her meaning before she shivered in sympathy.

“I know,” she agreed, “we seem to have been about for ages, and to have been through such a lot and yet

it's not properly morning. I've never spent such a long night."

It was true. Both of them were wellnigh exhausted, and were now in an acute stage of depression. The moon had set about an hour before, and the weather had changed. A damp, cold drizzle of rain was falling, and the faint glimmer of a cheerless November dawn served but to add to their general feeling of hopelessness and misery.

Hazel's sang-froid of some two hours earlier had long since deserted her.

"If only we could go in, in the ordinary way," she sighed, "and say we had come for breakfast—but we daren't."

"I suppose not," said Griselda wistfully. "I feel I could brave anybody—even Great-Uncle Herbert—if there were the chance of bacon and egg after it. Besides, I quite like Great-Uncle Herbert—I find it terribly difficult to think of him as a villain, Gaily."

Hazel shuddered. She didn't, but the dim outline of the house now coming into view saved her from replying. How were they to get in?

"If it weren't for the burglar alarm——" began Grizzy, voicing her thoughts.

"Yes, and yet if we don't manage to slip in while it's still dark, we haven't much chance," commented Hazel hopelessly. "Let's go a bit nearer anyhow—that's one benefit of this light, we don't have to worry about being seen."

The words were hardly out of her mouth before they almost proved their undoing: the great front door was thrown wide, and a stream of light poured

forth from the hall, lighting up the gravelled sweep on which they were standing; in a flash they had darted back, and now stood quaking in the shadow, with wildly pounding hearts, and ready to take to flight at the first sound of pursuit. Luck, however, had been with them. The moments passed and no alarm was raised; on the contrary, a servant could be seen busy with mops and dusters, though pausing every now and again to give a sleepy yawn.

"No wonder," sympathized Grizzy in a cautious whisper. "Imagine having to clean and polish before you're properly awake! I'd forget half the stuff I needed, if I were on that job. Gosh!" she broke off excitedly, "I believe that's what she's done——"

But Hazel was already tugging her forward. "She has," she whispered gleefully, "at least she's away, and left the door open. Now's our chance. Oh, I hope she doesn't come back."

"Or anybody else," added Grizzy, joining her in the wild, silent dash for the entrance; their eyes were blinded by the blaze of the outpouring light, and their ears strained for a sound of returning footsteps, but once again their luck held: with almost ridiculous ease they slipped through the open door and across the hall. They were half-way up the staircase, and well hidden from view, before they heard the sleepy maid going back to her duties, and only then did they pause to draw breath.

"Ouf-f-f!" breathed Grizzy, "we're in, anyhow," but Hazel was already tugging her forward.

"My room," she whispered urgently, "nobody's likely to be there for a while, and we can think what to do next."

The darkness of the upper floor brought a sense of security and the thick carpets spared them the necessity of tiptoeing—in no time Hazel had her hand on the door knob and was savouring in advance the comforting homeliness and welcome that this little sanctum, alone in the Grange, always brought to her. Cautiously she opened the door, only to step back on Grizzly's toes with excitement.

"Look!" she whispered, regardless of her companion's smothered yelp of pain. "She's here, Grizzly, she *must* be!" and, drawing the other in, she closed the door.

Grizzly blinked stupidly as Hazel, in a fit of recklessness, switched on the light.

"Yes, she seems to be here," she admitted uncertainly, "but where *is* she?" and so much in the grip of excitement were they, that the contradictory words went unnoticed.

"Having her bath, probably, though it's still terribly early—but look: the bed's been turned down, and there's my dressing-gown—yes, and a suit of my pyjamas on the bed—and there are her slippers—no, my slippers—and——" she stopped suddenly, and they faced each other blankly.

Grizzly nodded. "I wondered when it was going to strike you," she said. "If she were away for her bath, these things wouldn't be lying about—she'd have them on, and it would be her outdoor clothes we'd be seeing."

Hazel crossed mechanically to the wardrobe and looked in.

"Nothing but my things—before I got my school

uniform," she announced; "nothing—but—why, yes"—with a renewal of excitement—"there's *this*," and she held out her discovery.

"A slipper?" Grizzy looked her surprise. "But how——? Is there only one? And are you sure it's hers?"

"Yes—absolutely; sure it's hers, I mean, for the other one, a pale-blue leather slipper, was lying in her room at Clevedon. You remember I told you I was just looking round for its companion when I was knocked on the head."

Grizzy's face was a study.

"Goodness!" she exclaimed at last, "that's proof positive anyway. She must have been taken away from Clevedon so quickly that she didn't even have time to change her shoes."

"Probably struggled," conjectured Hazel, "and kicked off one slipper—maybe hoping it might be a clue. This one is, at any rate, whether she put it deliberately in the wardrobe herself, or some one else for her. We certainly know she's been here."

"H'm'ph!" Grizzy was despondent again. "Not much good is it; seeing that she's away now?"

It was stalemate once more. Dolefully Hazel switched off the light, and they sat down wearily on the bed, watching the November greyness gradually growing a little less intense, though no less cheerless. It was all they could do, in their complete exhaustion, to keep from falling asleep. Hazel must, indeed, have dozed for a few moments, for she suddenly awoke with a start as her head jerked backwards, and at the same moment Grizzy clutched her arm.

"Gaily, we're idiots!" she whispered. "If they think Hazel Warnford is here, anybody may come along at any moment and then we'll be for it. We'll have to slip out somehow."

Perhaps during her few moments of somnolence her subconscious mind had been working, but whatever the reason, Hazel had no doubt now as to their next move.

"Right," she agreed, "but first of all we're going to try to see Margaret."

"Margaret?" echoed Griselda vaguely. "Oh, yes, I remember, your sister who's ill? But, Gaily, do you think we can risk it? We were nearly caught the last time and, besides, do you think she'll be able to tell us any more?"

"That's what we've got to find out," responded Hazel grimly, then, in softened tones, went on:

"I'm sorry, Grizzy, but when we're here, and so deeply in things, there's no point in leaving this chance untried. Come on—if this is no use, we'll have to escape somehow and—and face the music at school."

"It'll be some tune," said Grizzy with an attempt at light-heartedness, and already joining her at the door, "but all's quiet outside. Let's risk it!"

Had either of them foreseen the hectic events of the next few moments nothing would have induced them to cross the threshold, but as it was, they slipped out into the still dim passage, blissfully unaware of the danger awaiting them.

All, as Grizzy had said, seemed quiet, and without incident they found themselves stealthily mounting the

dark stair leading to the invalid girl's room. Not a sound emerged from it on this occasion, and as they stood on the gloomy landing the very lack of noise seemed to take on an ominous quality and, in spite of themselves, they peered nervously back over their shoulders. Still there was nothing—still all was quiet—still—or was it?

With a muffled scream both girls cowered back, as in the dim light they saw the figure mounting the stairs. Desperately Hazel tried the door beside her, the door of her supposed sister's room, only to find it locked, and on the other side Griselda tried the one which previously had afforded them shelter, but this time in vain—it too refused to open.

They were trapped! And to add to that awful feeling was the sheer terror of the threatening approach of the silent figure, more terrifying too in reality when it materialized into Great-Uncle Herbert.

But what a Great-Uncle Herbert! Gone was all pretence of good-humoured tolerance, gone all the suave, smiling pleasantness which had made it so hard for Grizzy to think of him as a villain. She had no difficulty now.

His face was contorted with fury, and the little twinkling eyes that Hazel had always dreaded now made no attempt to conceal their ruthlessness. For a moment he did not speak, but stood on the step below the landing, gazing at them with concentrated venom.

His voice when it did give utterance was almost strangled with rage.

"So, it was *you*," he muttered, and the hatred which he managed to infuse into the "*you*" made them

flatten themselves even farther against the wall in an effort to withdraw from him as far as possible. "*You*," he went on, "who have spoiled everything. You who have helped her to get away, but don't think you'll slip out of this, my girl; *you're* going to do the work now. *You*, do you hear?"

With a horrible shock, Hazel realized that all his rage was concentrated on her; Grizzy, for all the notice he was taking of her, might not have been there, but there was no time for thought. Already he had seized her roughly by the arm and was tugging her downstairs. She had no choice but to follow, and Grizzy was in the act of making up the rear when from behind the locked door she heard an urgent whisper, and hesitated.

"Oh, how *could* she be caught again? How *could* she?" the voice reiterated, and Grizzy realized that the words were less a question than a statement. Obviously the girl inside had no idea of her presence on the landing. On an impulse she tapped on the door and the voice inside stopped immediately, only to ask next moment, "Who is it? Who's there?"

"Listen," breathed Grizzy. "Don't worry. Hazel Warnford *did* get away. It's Gaily More who was caught just now and I'm her friend. We were trying to find Hazel but she had already gone. Did you help her?"

"Hazel?" repeated the faint voice within. "Yes, I helped. But, oh, I don't understand. Where is Gaily? Why——?"

But Grizzy could wait no longer.

"Don't worry," she whispered again, "Gaily and I

will manage to wriggle out somehow. It'll be all right," and she turned and fled downstairs, but not before she caught again a faint bewildered repetition, "But I don't understand."

Great-Uncle Herbert and his captive had disappeared by the time she regained the passage, but from her previous knowledge of the house, she now made for the breakfast-room and was rewarded by hearing Great-Uncle Herbert's voice within.

Quaking with terror at the thought of thrusting herself into this family mystery, but determined at all costs to stand by her chum, she thrust open the door, murmuring politely, "May I come in?"

Aunt Mildred was now one of the party and both she and Great-Uncle Herbert rounded on the intruder.

"What do you want?" the latter demanded fiercely.

"I'm sorry," said Grizzy apologetically, "but I'm in this with Gaily and if she's in any trouble, well—I'm just as much to blame as she is," and she cast a reassuring glance at Hazel, who stood white-faced but determined-looking between her two supposed relatives.

Great-Uncle Herbert's reply to this little speech could be described only as a snarl. "As much to blame!" he repeated scornfully. "Just another of those little interfering Paul Prys who have been causing trouble all along. I was suspicious the last time, but now I'll see that your headmistress deals with you, and the sooner you take yourself off to school the better. Gaily is our concern. Be off with you."

But Grizzy stood her ground.

"I'm staying with Gaily," she reaffirmed doggedly,

and as if to emphasize her words, crossed over rapidly and stood at Hazel's side.

Great-Uncle Herbert's arm darted out, and for a moment Grizzy feared that he was going to strike her, or shake her, his face so blazed with wrath, but Aunt Mildred intervened.

"Dad," she said warningly and then, lowering her voice, spoke in an undertone which they could not catch, but it was obvious from his face that he was being persuaded against his will.

"Oh, very well," he said at last ungraciously, and moved towards the table.

Aunt Mildred's face was white and strained but her voice when she spoke was reasonably composed.

"You had better have some breakfast first," she said, "and we will discuss arrangements later."

The prospect of breakfast acted like a tonic to Grizzy's volatile spirits.

"Oh, thank you," she exclaimed, drawing in her chair. "I'm sure we'll discuss much better afterwards, for Gaily and I are just starving. I'm really sorry," she went on conversationally, and at the same time attacking her bacon and egg with relish, "to be butting in like this, but honestly it's not our fault. It's all that girl Hazel Warnford's that there seems to be so much mystery about. I think she's a bit of a pest myself and I think Gaily's beginning to feel that too. Aren't you, Gaily? Of course, if *you* know all about the mystery, and what it's all about, that may make things quite different."

If Grizzy had thrown a bombshell into their midst she could not have produced more effect.

Aunt Mildred stared at her with wide startled eyes, Great-Uncle Herbert scowled with a look that would have killed her if it possibly could, while Hazel choked noisily over her coffee.

Grizzy serenely continued with her breakfast.

CHAPTER XX

Miss Steading in Command

"And *now* do you understand?" Great-Uncle Herbert's little eyes were like glinting sparks of fire and he was almost spitting out his words in fury. "That girl whom you met in the train, that girl whom Mrs. Archer and her brother, that crook lawyer what's-his-name——?"

"Golding," murmured Grizzy helpfully.

Great-Uncle Herbert glowered, but went on.

"Yes, Golding. Well, that girl they've been passing off as Hazel Warnford. That girl, I tell you"—and he paused to give a venomous emphasis to his words—"is no more Hazel Warnford than you are."

In the dazed silence that followed, Hazel felt an insane desire to burst out laughing. The ridiculous turn that things were taking—the sheer absurdity of this latest twist—was almost too much for her, but fortunately Great-Uncle Herbert took her hesitation and confusion as natural, and appeared even to be somewhat mollified by it. At any rate he proceeded a little more calmly.

"Yes, you may well look surprised, but it's true.

Your Aunt Mildred and myself are quite convinced that Hazel Warnford no longer exists and that this is all a plot on their part."

Hazel, still struggling with her bewilderment, found her voice.

"A plot?" she repeated. "But why? What difference could Hazel Warnford make to anybody? You sound as if she were dreadfully important."

Aunt Mildred made to speak, but Great-Uncle Herbert's snort anticipated her.

"What difference? Important! Don't try to put that stuff over on me. As if you didn't know all about her. Haven't you and your prying friends been doing everything you could to get hold of her—just because you knew what she meant? No, no, you needn't try to pretend to be so simple."

There was no mistaking his indignation—Hazel realized that it was genuine, and that in some peculiar way Grizzy and she were being looked on as members of a rival gang. More than ever she wanted to laugh—if only he and Aunt Mildred knew the truth!

They were still in the breakfast-room, but ever since Grizzy's startling remarks, there had evidently been no thought of sending her back to school on her own, for which Hazel was profoundly thankful. She herself had been aghast for the moment that the other should show her hand so plainly, but now she saw how clever a move it had been. After all, Grizzy hadn't told them anything new but she certainly had goaded Great-Uncle Herbert into revealing *his* plans. She pulled her straying wits together as his voice broke in again.

"So now, do you understand?" he was saying. "You are going to be Hazel Warnford—it's what your aunt and I intended at the beginning anyway. It was our only reason for bringing you home."

Hazel hardly heard his last remark. Her head was spinning. "You are going to be Hazel Warnford."

"But how——?" she managed to stammer, and at the same time Grizzy put in.

"But what about the other Hazel? She must still be about somewhere."

Great-Uncle Herbert rounded on her fiercely.

"Mind your own business, miss. You say you had nothing to do with her escaping from here, but I'm still not too sure. And in any case she's an impostor—I've felt that all along and if you don't want to get into any more trouble—and you too"—and he glared at Hazel—"you'll both of you keep your tongues quiet except to agree with what I say."

It seemed incredible now that Great-Uncle Herbert should ever have appeared pleasant and jolly, but they were saved from making any answer to his latest threats by the sudden insistent ringing of the telephone bell.

Aunt Mildred's face grew paler even than before. It was plain that her nerves were at breaking point, but Great-Uncle Herbert merely scowled, and strode out into the hall.

He drew the door to behind him, but his threatening presence still seemed to possess them, allowing no relaxation. They glanced uneasily at one another while the low murmur of his voice at the 'phone came to their ears, but not clearly enough to be distinguished. Yet,

at such a high pitch of tension were they all, that they felt the present conversation had something—must have something—to do with the matter on hand. They were not mistaken.

They heard the receiver being replaced with a noisy click, and next moment he came striding back into the room, rubbing his hands, and beaming all over his face. Hazel felt herself grow sick with apprehension, and caught a wary glance from Grizzy's eyes. Aunt Mildred simply stared.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed, "you would think some disaster had happened, instead of something"—he gave a low chuckle—"something most convenient. You are going back to school at once—but, of course," he added as he intercepted their relieved glances, "Aunt Mildred and I are going with you, and this—*this*, remember"—and he waggled a fat forefinger in Hazel's direction—"is where *you* are going to play *your* part. Go upstairs with them, Mildred, while they get ready. I don't want any more disappearing tricks. The car will be round in ten minutes."

As they were ushered out of the room Grizzy's eyes flashed a question, but Hazel gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head. Slight as it had been though, Great-Uncle Herbert had understood.

He laughed wickedly. "No, no, you needn't try to make a bolt for it—everywhere is being too well watched. Besides,"—his voice sank to a silky purr that was far more terrifying than his former anger—"I don't think you would enjoy your reception at school if you arrived unattended. I have seen to that!"

Meantime in the headmistress's room at St. Margaret's Miss Steading and Miss Ringer faced each other across the study table. Both were showing signs of strain and anxiety.

"I hate to say it," the former was remarking, "but I'm afraid the new girl, Abigail More, has been a very bad influence among the others. It's only since she came that we have had this disobedience—and this dreadful slipping out of school—at *night*." There was genuine horror in her voice over the last two words.

Miss Ringer nodded slowly. "It looks like it," she admitted, "and yet I must say I'd never have thought so from what I've seen of her. I've really liked her, and she has been most earnest in her work."

"Yes—I had formed quite a favourable impression too"—Miss Steading was trying desperately to be fair—"but, you remember, from the first she has been rather upsetting? There was that story of meeting the girl, Hazel Warnford, in the train, and of expecting to find her here—and we discovered there was no substance for that belief. The telegram I had had beforehand was definitely genuine. I'm inclined to think—to put it at its kindest—that she lets her imagination run away with her. I'm almost sorry I communicated with those people in London who were advertising, for, in a way, I've only her story to go on." She glanced at the clock and frowned. "Their representative will be here any time now, but I'll just have to ask him to wait till the others arrive."

The telephone beside her rang sharply.

Miss Ringer made to withdraw as the headmistress lifted the receiver, but a movement of her hand

motioned her to stay. Next moment she had cast aside all pretence of politeness, and was listening, agog with curiosity.

"What? Hazel Warnford—here in school? Certainly *not*." Miss Steading's voice was at its most "headmistressish". "But I understood you were taking her to London. You mean she has *disappeared*?"

At this point Miss Ringer noticed a change come over the headmistress's face, and her voice mellowed in accordance.

"Could you possibly come over to school—yes, right away if you can? It has just occurred to me that I *might* be able to be helpful, but I'd rather not discuss it on the 'phone. Within the next half-hour? *Very good!*" And Miss Steading replaced the receiver with a look of intense satisfaction on her face.

"You heard?" she queried, turning to her form-mistress. "Hazel Warnford has disappeared. I'm beginning to have doubts," she added, unconsciously echoing Great-Uncle Herbert, "as to whether this girl, Hazel Warnford, actually exists at all."

"But who was 'phoning?" inquired Miss Ringer.

"Oh, her guardian—or supposed guardian—that Mrs. Archer who wrote from Clevedon. She's coming over."

"So I heard. Er——" Miss Ringer hesitated to put the obvious question point-blank, but the headmistress saved her the trouble.

"You're wondering why?" she said with a slight smile. "To be honest I'm wondering myself—as to why I asked her, I mean. I'm afraid there's a good deal of plain, ordinary curiosity behind it. I feel that

if the people from the Grange, and Mrs. Archer *and* that Mr. Simmonds, who is due from London, can all be brought together, we may at last get at the truth of this matter. In fact, if it weren't that our two girls were still missing"—her face resumed its worried look—"I think I'd almost enjoy this. It's quite like a detective story. But where *can* they be—Amanda Weir, I mean, and Sheila Brown-Browne?"

"Probably looking for Hazel Warnford," responded Miss Ringer, with a touch of flippancy. "Shall I——" but before she could complete her question there was a rush of footsteps outside, the merest apology for a knock, and the door was thrown open. In stumbled, rather than walked, three of the most bedraggled and untidy objects ever to have crossed that threshold.

"Oh, please, Miss Steading——" faltered the foremost apparition, only to stop before the horror in the headmistress's face.

Miss Steading's countenance was indeed a study and for once she felt her official composure almost deserting her. She stood stockstill and gazed as if she could hardly believe her eyes.

"Amanda Weir!" she at last ejaculated in shocked tones.

"And Sheila Brown-Browne," added Miss Ringer, struggling too between astonishment and relief, "and surely that is Abigail More? But how——" She broke off and looked uncertainly from the third figure to the headmistress.

Perplexity was uppermost now too in Miss Steading's gaze, but before she could speak, hurried footsteps once more sounded from the corridor outside, and next

moment Griselda and Hazel appeared in the still open doorway.

"Oh, Miss Steading," began the former, looking flustered and anxious, "please don't be angry. We——" She broke off as her eyes lighted on the dejected-looking trio already in the room, and at the same moment Hazel gasped involuntarily: "They're here!"

She turned to the headmistress impulsively.

"Do you know all about it already, Miss Steading?"—the relief in her voice was almost touching. "I'm so sorry. I wanted to tell you at the beginning but I——" She floundered to a stop before the sternness in the other's eyes.

"I do *not* know all about it, or even anything about it," was the chilling answer, and the hearts of the five girls sank to the lowest depths, but once more there was an interruption from outside.

It was Betsy, one of the maids.

"Mr. and Miss Fenniston to see you, ma'am. They said you were expecting them."

"Bring them in, Betsy," Miss Steading commanded, although from the sound of approaching footsteps it was evident that her visitors were not waiting to be brought. Acting on an impulse the headmistress opened a door leading into a little side-room.

"You girls had better wait in here meantime," she said sternly, and as they thankfully obeyed, she turned to greet the latest comers.

Not that they were waiting for greetings or welcome. Great-Uncle Herbert, positively bristling with wrath, stood on the threshold—a little in advance of Aunt Mildred.

"Where is my ward?" he demanded furiously.

Miss Steading gazed at him coldly.

"Will you come in, please, and be seated? Good morning, Miss Fenniston; we have met before, I remember. And now what can I do for you?"

But Great-Uncle Herbert was not going to be cowed by any such chilling reception. He stood clutching the back of the chair offered to him while Aunt Mildred sank gratefully on to hers, and once more demanded:

"Where is my ward?"

Miss Ringer created a slight diversion by murmuring politely, "Shall I leave you?" knowing perfectly well, even before she met the headmistress's detaining glance, that she would be remaining.

It gave Miss Steading, however, just the slight pause necessary.

"Where is your ward?" she repeated. "But it is less than an hour since you told me over the 'phone that she was with you, and that you were bringing her over. It is I who should be asking *you* where she is."

"Don't temporize," snapped Great-Uncle Herbert, utterly undaunted; "you know perfectly well that she gave us the slip just at the school door, she and that friend of hers, Grizzy or Griselda or whatever it is she calls herself. And I'm certain that you know where they are, and I *demand*," he glowered, "to have my ward restored to me."

But once again his "demand" had to be postponed.

"Oh, Miss Steading," broke in a new voice from the doorway, "forgive me for coming in like this, but I told the maid you were expecting me. I'm

Mrs. Archer and this is my brother, John Golding."

Miss Steading bowed and looked questioningly as the newcomers entered the room.

"We are so anxious about our ward, and when you said on the 'phone you thought you might be able to help, my brother insisted on coming with me. *Do* you know anything about her, Miss Steading? Hazel Warnford, I mean? She was so eager to come to school here, but as you know, we had to postpone that till next term. And now it's so awful to think she has disappeared."

"Disappeared? Hazel Warnford disappeared?" said a new voice, and the occupants of the study turned sharply in its direction. A tall, elderly man, with a pleasant professional air, was already advancing into the room.

Miss Steading hurried forward. "Mr. Simmonds?" she queried, shaking hands. "I have been expecting you, but, as you will see, we are at the moment a large company. Let me introduce you."

Rapidly she performed the introductions despite the obvious impatience of her other guests, but equally obviously Miss Steading was now determined to take command in her own domain.

"Kindly be seated, all of you," she said, in the voice of one accustomed to be obeyed, and Great-Uncle Herbert with a furious look, particularly at John Golding and Mrs. Archer, sat down.

Miss Steading from her seat behind the table surveyed the company with a speculative air, and only Miss Ringer, who sat on her left, had the slightest suspicion of how desperately nervous she really was.

"As I say, Mr. Simmonds, we are a larger company than you probably expected to meet, but I imagine you will be interested to hear what everyone has to say. You see"—and she gazed calmly round at the others as she prepared to drop her bombshell—"Mr. Simmonds has come down specially to hear anything that can be told about Hazel Warnford, and that is why I have arranged that you should all be here. You appear—I must confess I do not know why—to be so greatly concerned with that mysterious girl's whereabouts," and having let her varied company realize that their presence there was no mere coincidence, but had been deliberately engineered by her, Miss Steading sat back in her chair with a little satisfied smile hovering around her lips.

CHAPTER XXI

"A Mere Trifle"

"But I assure you——" thundered Great-Uncle Herbert's voice.

"But I assure *you*——" thundered back the other, which they assumed to be Mr. Golding's.

Despite their complete dispiritedness Brownie, in the little side-room, emitted a nervous giggle.

"Sh'h'h!" warned Amanda, and stepped back to survey her handiwork.

"I don't know what good it's going to do," she whispered, "but it's certainly effective."

There was no doubt of that. Gaily More, dressed now in Grizzly's school coat and hat, stood side by side with Hazel, and their likeness to each other, which had been noticeable before, was now astonishing.

The voices in the study next door rose and fell and in the side-room the silence and apprehension grew almost unbearable.

"Oh, I wonder what's going to happen," murmured Hazel. "I wonder if——" but she was not to wonder long.

"But the point is," came Great-Uncle Herbert's voice, "where *is* my ward, Hazel Warnford?"

"And mine—the real Hazel Warnford," capped Mr. Golding's venomously. "You know you're talking nonsense. Your ward is no more Hazel Warnford than that chair is."

"Well, there certainly can't be two of them——" put in the pleasant, pedantic tones of Mr. Simmonds.

Whether Miss Steading remembered the perplexing likeness and felt that the dramatic moment had come, or whether it was coincidence that she chose that particular time, will never be known. At any rate Mr. Simmonds had scarcely pronounced this dictum when she threw open the side-room door.

"You girls had better come through now," she commanded, and with sinking hearts they obeyed; Amanda still taking charge sufficiently to engineer that Hazel and Gaily should go first.

"No, there certainly can't be two of them," repeated the lawyer rather irritably, as he felt the attention of his audience slipping from him, and then for the moment there was a dazed silence.

"God bless my soul! There *are* two of you," came at last in explosive tones from Mr. Simmonds, shaken for once out of his usual professional calm, and corresponding exclamations echoed all over the room. Even Miss Steading and Miss Ringer, who had been to some extent prepared, looked thoroughly staggered as Hazel and Gaily More stood silently under the scrutiny of the seven pairs of startled eyes. If they had practised their entry for weeks beforehand, it could not have been more effective. The same little smile—a smile which in both cases concealed their extreme nervousness—hovered round their lips, and accentuated, if anything had been needed, the remarkable similarity between them.

"Dear me! I had no idea of this." It was Miss Steading who spoke, as she peered in a bewildered fashion at the two girls.

"Which of you is my pupil, Abigail More?"

"Yes, that's what I want to know," cut in Great-Uncle Herbert, recovering his composure with an effort.

Miss Steading cast a withering glance in his direction, and repeated her question.

The two girls looked at each other miserably. Hazel could see that Gaily, like herself, was casting about desperately for some means of evading a direct admission—at least till they knew better how matters stood. As the easiest way out, they both remained obstinately silent.

"Tut, tut," exclaimed the headmistress angrily, "you must answer. Which of you——"

"Pardon me, Miss Steading"—and Mr. Simmonds

unexpectedly came to the rescue—"perhaps we might put it the other way round: Which of you two girls is Hazel Warnford?"

With a feeling of relief Hazel made up her mind to answer.

"I am," she said, and then, despite the tension, almost laughed, for practically in the same breath Gaily More too affirmed staunchly:

"I am."

It was too much for Great-Uncle Herbert. He jumped up, and strode over to the two girls on whom every eye was fixed.

"Now," he demanded, "the truth. Which of you is Hazel Warnford?"

There was nothing for it but to repeat themselves. Almost as if they were automatic figures they answered as with one voice:

"I am."

Great-Uncle Herbert looked as if he would have struck them with pleasure. As it was he caught each of them by the shoulder, and propelled, almost *ran* them over to Aunt Mildred.

"Wake up, Mildred," he ordered unnecessarily, for certainly no one in the study at that moment felt like sleeping. "Surely you can tell which of these girls is our ward—the girl we called Gaily More, but whom we knew to be Hazel Warnford?"

Aunt Mildred hesitated—looked frightened, and as if she would fain have refused and washed her hands of the whole business, but suddenly, as if making up her mind, she said in a voice utterly devoid of expression:

"Yes, I am sure this is our ward," and looking past Hazel, pointed to Gaily More.

"But I'm sure you're wrong," burst in Mrs. Archer, speaking for the first time. "I'm sure that's *our* ward. She has been staying with me too long for me to be mistaken. Isn't this Hazel Warnford, John?" she appealed to her brother.

John Golding was very different now from the disinterested lawyer whom Hazel had seen at his office on that momentous far-off day, but the distaste that she had felt faintly for him then, and for his callous lack of concern for her, strengthened now into active dislike. There was a ferrety cunning in the sharpness of his eyes, as he peered from her to Gaily and back again.

"I can't be sure," he muttered angrily. "I'd almost have said the other one"—Hazel shuddered inwardly—"but you've been seeing her every day. You *must* be right, I suppose."

Practically unnoticed, Miss Ringer, a few moments before, had whispered to Miss Steading and slipped out. Now, as John Golding finished speaking, she reappeared carrying an exercise book in her hand. With an apologetic glance at the headmistress, she broke in briskly:

"There's no need to be in doubt about *that* matter," she remarked. "We can soon settle it. Now, come along you two girls. I wish you both to write on this page, 'I am a pupil of St. Margaret's'. Here you are, Hazel No. 1, take this pen. Now you, Hazel No. 2—the same thing—Good!"

There was no help for it. Brownie, Amanda, and Griselda in the background almost groaned aloud, but

there was no way out. Hazel looked round the circle of intent faces, and wondered if she could possibly refuse, but the headmistress's stern countenance turned the scale. There was no disobeying *that* look. Slowly and reluctantly she wrote, and equally reluctantly Gaily followed suit.

Miss Ringer lifted the two papers, and compared them with the writing in the exercise book.

“There you are,” she said triumphantly. “The similarity doesn't extend to their hand-writing. This is undoubtedly our pupil, Abigail More,” and she rested her hand lightly on Hazel's shoulder.

Immediately there was a fresh outburst of arguing, Great-Uncle Herbert's voice raised loudly, “Yes, but she is really Hazel Warnford,” and John Golding and Mrs. Archer protesting, “Nothing of the sort. The other one is definitely Hazel Warnford; there's no doubt about it now.”

Across this tumult cut Miss Steading's authoritative voice: “Will you kindly all resume your seats, and stop talking. Mr. Simmonds—perhaps you will now take charge?”

The tone of command had its effect. Like a pack of school children in disgrace the Grange and Clevedon parties subsided, and Mr. Simmonds carefully selected a bunch of documents from his brief-case, adjusted his horn-rimmed spectacles with maddening deliberation, gave a little cough, and beamed benignly on the assembled company.

“Well,” he began at last, with a further rustling of papers, “I must confess I have been taken by surprise—yes, very *much* taken by surprise. I came here to-day

thinking I might glean a little information about that elusive young lady, Miss Hazel Warnford. Instead"—his beam became positively dazzling—"I find not only the young lady herself, but actually in duplicate. In fact, I appear to have plunged completely, if I may say so in these academic surroundings, *in medias res*."

Miss Ringer had to give a little cough at this point as her ears caught Brownie's scarcely breathed whisper, "Gosh! he talks Latin," but a further diversion saved her.

Whether it was the prosy pedantry of the lawyer's voice, or merely that her overstrained nerves could bear it no longer, Hazel could never afterwards decide. All she knew was that she *must* interrupt, must *try* to bring things to a head.

"Oh, please, I'm sorry to interrupt," she begged, "but will you not tell us at once what this is all about, and why there is so much fuss about Hazel Warnford now? Nobody seemed to care particularly about her before," she added bitterly.

Mr. Simmonds looked pained, and Miss Steading uttered a disapproving "Abigail!", but it was obvious from everyone's expression that they were in heartfelt agreement—all, that is, except Mr. Simmonds himself.

"My dear young lady," he remarked in reproving tones, "you must be patient. There is a great deal at stake, you know——"

"But that's what I *don't* know," protested Hazel, almost on a note of frenzy, and Gaily More, rallying to her aid, put in even more bluntly: "Yes, please tell us what *is* at stake. *That's* what we want to know."

There was a little gasping silence. Miss Steading's

countenance expressed every kind of disapproval that two mere children should interrupt in this way, but even she could not but feel that the two children were this time speaking to the point. As tense and eager as any member of the Grange or Clevedon parties, she bent forward to hear the lawyer's reply.

“What *is* at stake?” he repeated almost peevishly, and then suddenly seemed to realize the rapt attention which was being accorded him. Gratification overspread his features once more; it was his moment of triumph.

“Oh, just a mere trifle,” he said, with an attempt at airiness, “a matter of some quarter of a million pounds!”

CHAPTER XXII

Miss Steading is Appalled

“A quarter of a million pounds!”

It was Hazel who spoke—oblivious for the moment of Miss Steading—of everything indeed but this astounding announcement, and in the general stupefaction she went on incredulously:

“Do you mean that I—” she corrected herself—“that Hazel Warnford is to get a quarter of a million pounds?”

Out of the corner of her eye she could see Great-Uncle Herbert almost purring with satisfaction at her stumble over the name, but Mr. Simmonds was now claiming all her attention.

"Well, yes," he pronounced judicially, "or rather yes and no. You will have observed that there is a good deal of—er—rivalry for the guardianship of the said Hazel Warnford——" He paused in his irritating way, while Hazel almost laughed at this understatement, but recollecting her surroundings she cast an apologetic look at Miss Steading and murmured politely, "Yes—why?"

"Dear me! Dear me! You are most impatient. However, there is perhaps no point in delaying further. The reason is"—but even then he could not resist another dramatic pause, while he savoured the tense expectancy on every face—"the reason is," he repeated, "that a sum of five thousand pounds per annum is also to be paid to those guardians under whose charge she is on the date of her thirteenth birthday—a date which is——"

"The twenty-first of November," Hazel supplied involuntarily.

"Abigail!" Miss Steading's voice quivered with disapproval. "You must *not* usurp Mr. Simmond's attention in this way," but the lawyer was already peering at her refractory pupil over the top of his spectacles.

"You appear to be very well versed in the—er—facts," he was beginning, when Great-Uncle Herbert again interrupted.

"And doesn't that prove it?" he demanded jubilantly. "How could she know a thing like that if she weren't the real Hazel Warnford? Yes, I know," he went on, before the other could answer, "I know we have called her Abigail More, but that was for—" he hesitated for a phrase, "for security reasons," he went

on blandly. "We knew there must be a good deal of money involved and for her own safety kept her identity secret as long as possible in case of danger. Results," and he glowered ferociously at Mrs. Archer and her brother, "have certainly proved that I was right."

There was such an air of assurance about him that even Miss Steading and Miss Ringer, who had felt that the identity question had been comfortably settled, began to feel shaken. Indeed, had he been content to leave it at that for the moment, he would have carried a fair amount of conviction in spite of the blustering protests immediately forthcoming from John Golding, but he was not content.

"Isn't that so, Mildred?" he demanded, swinging round to his daughter for confirmation.

Of all the surprises of that eventful day the one that followed was almost the greatest. Mildred Feniston had said so little, and had looked so utterly nervous in comparison with Great-Uncle Herbert's dynamic rage and certainty, that the company in general, from the headmistress downwards, had tended to ignore, if not even to forget her presence. They were to be sharply reminded of it.

"No, Dad," she remarked with icy calmness—a calmness that brought back vividly to Hazel her first meeting with her on the station, "it is not so, and you know very well that it is not. Abigail More is just Abigail More, or Gaily, as we have learned to call her," and she smiled quite kindly at Hazel; "Abigail More, my niece, your grand-daughter, and the sister of poor Margaret. She is quite definitely *not* Hazel Warnford, and why you ever wanted to embark on

this hare-brained scheme to prove that she is, I just cannot imagine. I have done my best to dissuade you—for you know you don't need that money—but as you wouldn't listen before, I have to say it now. I'm having nothing more to do with it."

Hazel could feel it in her heart almost to be sorry for Great-Uncle Herbert at that moment. There was veritable anguish in his cry of "Mildred!"—anguish in which rage, disappointment, but most of all a kind of aghast surprise, were blended. All at once he seemed to collapse into an old, shrunken man. Perhaps his daughter sensed this for there was a placatory note in her voice.

"It's true, Dad," she was beginning, when John Golding interrupted.

"Excuse me," he said with a perfunctory attempt at apology, "but need we waste any more time if what you say is the case?" He appealed to Mr. Simmonds. "I am a lawyer like yourself, sir, and I assure you Hazel Warnford's affairs have been in my hands since the death of her parents, some ten or eleven years ago. I admit I had no occasion to see her personally until very recently, when her old nurse died, and it was decided that she should go to school. But before that, I—"—for the first time his glib tongue hesitated, and his eyes shifted as he caught Hazel's intent gaze bent upon him—"before that, I thought she would benefit by a little holiday with my sister, Mrs. Archer, at Clevedon, and there she has been ever since," he concluded, but with a little less assurance in his voice.

Once again Miss Steading felt like bestowing a

public rebuke as the supposed Hazel Warnford interrupted, but she refrained. After all, she was not responsible for *her* behaviour.

"Ever since?" Gaily More repeated. "Aren't you forgetting last night when Great-Uncle Herbert took me off to the Grange? I was meaning to escape anyway, but with the girls," and she glanced towards the intent but somewhat abashed-looking trio by the doorway, "not with him."

John Golding was taken off his guard.

"But how did he know you were in the laundry?" he asked.

It was Gaily More's turn to look perplexed.

"The laundry?" she repeated wonderingly. "It was from my own room."

"That was me," broke in Hazel, "in the laundry, I mean. You thought——" she faltered into silence as the headmistress stood up imperiously.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed. "What *is* all this about? I am appalled at what I am hearing, but I really cannot permit you girls to be taking charge of the discussion in this fashion. It is *most* unbecoming."

Mr. Simmonds gave a deprecating little cough.

"I agree with you entirely, madam," he put in, in placatory tones, "but, with your permission, I think we *should* hear their own accounts of their respective disappearances last night." His voice was very serious; the little interplay of the previous few moments had evidently opened his eyes to the fact that there were dark and unpleasant patches in the case before him.

Miss Steading yielded, though with no very good grace.

"Perhaps you are right," she admitted. "Abigail, you begin then. Just exactly what *did* happen? The truth, remember," adding, as she saw Hazel flush, "I mean that you are quite safe; no one can harm either of you. I shall see to that."

Falteringly Hazel took up her tale, but as she proceeded confidence grew, especially after she had reached the point where Thomas's pursuit had caused her to be separated from the others. Brownie, Amanda, and Grizzy edged farther and farther into the room, and as Hazel recounted her rescue from the laundry by the typist, and then the unexpected treachery of her rescuer, foiled only by the accident to the car tyre, Brownie's lips formed themselves into a continuous, though unuttered, "Gosh!", but nobody noticed. As for Miss Steading and Miss Ringer—their faces were a study: to think that such things should have been going on, and to a pupil of St. Margaret's!

The dreadful darkness and loneliness of the wood; the overwhelming relief when Grizzy had appeared; the lift on the milk lorry; and finally their stealthy entry into the Grange in the dim light of early morning, only to discover that Hazel Warnford had been there but had gone. Hazel almost slipped up at that point in her recital, but remembered in time that she was still playing the role of Gaily More. She looked round wearily.

"And I think that's all," she said, "at least you pretty well know the rest. Great-Uncle Herbert discovered us when we were trying to find out through the door from Margaret—my sister," she added explanatorily, but with a twinge of guilt at the deception,

"to find out if she knew anything about Hazel, and well—that really is all, for when you 'phoned he told you that Grizzy and I were there and that he would bring us over—and he did. The only thing—" Here Hazel's eyes momentarily caught Grizzy's glance, and her face lit up with a smile. "Yes, the only other thing was that we dived out of the car as soon as we stopped, in order to see you first, Miss Steading. We hadn't time for explanations, but we thought it would let you know we were—we were really in a—" she sought for a descriptive phrase "a dreadful fix," she finished inadequately.

If Miss Steading's face had been grim before, it was positively awe-inspiring now. She turned to the lawyer.

"I think you will agree with me, Mr. Simmonds, that there is a great deal here which will have to be investigated further."

The lawyer's eyes were very serious, but he merely nodded.

"Perhaps we had better hear the other young lady's story first?" he suggested.

"Well then, Hazel Warnford?" prompted the head-mistress.

Gaily More took a deep breath. She had had more time to marshal her facts than Hazel, and now spoke with an air of quiet confidence which was strangely impressive.

"There's really very little left for me to tell," she began with a slight smile, "and nothing half so exciting as—as Gaily's story"—there was just a fraction of hesitation before the name, but possibly only Hazel was aware of it.

"As I've already said," she went on, "I had intended trying to escape last night, and I had sent word to school that Mrs. Archer was to be at the Grange for dinner, in the hope that Gaily and the others would come to my help. They did—but unfortunately Great-Uncle Herbert arrived first. He must have told the maid downstairs that Mrs. Archer had sent him for me, for he just appeared. Actually he had left Mrs. Archer and Aunt Mildred chatting in the drawing-room after dinner and was just 'fitting me in' before he went back to join them for coffee." Gaily paused, and gave the whimsical, attractive smile which had so captivated Hazel's heart at their first meeting in the train.

"I didn't want to go, of course," she pronounced calmly, "but I hadn't much choice, and, to be honest, once I had given in I hadn't much to complain of—I was left in your lovely little room at the Grange, and told to make use of all your things that I wanted, Gaily, and—well, that was that!"

"Did you leave one slipper in your own room, and the other one at the Grange?" broke in Grizzy impulsively, and then was covered with confusion. "Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Steading," she faltered, "but could I please ask that?" She seemed to read the headmistress's cold glance as assent for she went on, "I mean, did you leave them that way on purpose—as a clue, or was it just an accident?"

"You noticed them then?" Gaily More's voice was comfortingly appreciative and Grizzy relaxed.

"That was clever of you," the other went on. "It was the only thing I could think of, so I snatched one

up, when Great-Uncle Herbert turned his head for a moment, and hoped that the sight of just *one* slipper might make you suspicious—if any of you did manage to come to look for me. I must admit, though, I didn't expect it to be much good—and I had even less hope of the other one's being noticed when I parked it in the wardrobe at the Grange."

"And yet, you see, we discovered them both," exclaimed Grizzy triumphantly. Just as quickly she became crestfallen again. "Not that it did us much good," she admitted, "for you were away by that time."

"Yes, how *did* you manage to escape?" put in Hazel quickly.

Miss Steading moved restlessly. It was against all her ideas of discipline and what was fitting, that these young people should be talking in this way—almost as if their elders did not exist. She made to interrupt, but Mr. Simmonds's eyes detained her. "Let them tell it in their own way," his look said again. "We'll come by the truth all the more readily," and reluctantly she settled back in her chair.

"How did I escape?" repeated Gaily More with a suggestion—a *ridiculous* suggestion the headmistress felt—of laughter in her voice. "That's where Amanda and Brownie come in. I think they'd better tell you about that."

CHAPTER XXIII

The Conference Continues

Brownie and Amanda looked decidedly abashed at being thus suddenly drawn into prominence. They glanced diffidently from Miss Steading to Mr. Simmonds, and back again to the headmistress, but once again the lawyer forced the issue.

"I think," he murmured apologetically, "if you will allow it, that we should hear them?" and as Miss Steading bowed in resigned assent, he smiled encouragingly to the two girls.

"Very well then, young ladies, let us hear what *you* have to say about last night."

Brownie's spirits responded at once to this encouragement.

"It was lovely!" she exclaimed enthusiastically, then meeting the headmistress's outraged glance, she retracted hurriedly. "I mean, it was tremendously exciting, although we were really terribly frightened most of the time—especially when we found that Grizzy had disappeared too. We didn't know whether to go in search of her and Gaily, or still to look for Hazel Warnford."

"It was Thomas who decided for us," put in Amanda.

"Oh dear, yes, it was Thomas!" Brownie agreed, and to the amazement of everyone began to laugh helplessly.

Amanda came desperately to the rescue—just in

time, for both Miss Steading and Miss Ringer looked almost as if they would explode.

"It was Thomas," she began, her own voice quivering slightly as poor Brownie heaved with renewed laughter.

"We have heard that some three times already," said Miss Steading tartly. "Who *is* this Thomas that you are talking about?"

"He is my gardener, I imagine," volunteered Mrs. Archer, "a most trustworthy man, though perhaps a little simple. He has been greatly annoyed lately by your pupils—those girls no doubt—trespassing on the grounds."

Miss Steading's manner froze still further.

"As this is the first I have heard of it," she responded coldly, "naturally I can give no opinion on the matter. I can, however, assure you that none of my pupils will trespass on your grounds again."

"My tenancy of the house expires this month in any case, so it won't matter to me if they do."

Miss Steading ignored this. "We are waiting, Amanda," she remarked.

Amanda avoided Brownie's eyes, and embarked on her tale:

"Gaily has told you"—and she glanced at Hazel—"how Grizzy—Griselda"—she corrected herself hurriedly—"slipped away to look for her, but we didn't miss her for quite a long time, we were so busy"—her voice quivered with laughter in spite of herself—"bewitching Thomas."

"You—*what*?" Miss Steading's voice was almost beyond registering further indignation.

"That's what he really thought," Amanda explained apologetically, "that he was bewitched, you know. We were dancing about in the darkness among the trees, and whispering all the time from different directions, 'Thomas, what have you done with Hazel Warnford?' or 'Thomas, where is Hazel Warnford? Tell, or the fairies will haunt you!' and things like that till—till we were almost sorry for him." Amanda paused, but the merriment which she could not keep from her eyes belied her last words.

"We couldn't see him properly," she went on, "but after a bit he stopped moving about, and we were able to stop too then and to listen to him. He kept moaning about 'Poor Thomas, it be the ferlies this time and no mistake', and then he began to make excuses, 'But I be'ant to blame, ferlies, it's not me you should be haunting. It be the old gentleman at the Grange. I seed him myself, ferlies, not but an hour ago. Away in his car he were, and Miss Hazel wid him; and he just pushed me aside at the door, and said he were taking her to Mrs. Archer. Were I not right to let him go, ferlies? But it be the truth I'm telling you. Away and haunt *him*, and let poor Thomas be!'"

Amanda paused and there was a strangled giggle from Brownie.

"So we decided we'd go and haunt him," went on Amanda a little wildly—it was obvious she was in terror of losing her gravity also. "I mean, that we'd go to the Grange. Only we didn't want to leave poor Thomas too unhappy; he was still moping and moaning away, so I just called 'Avaunt, Thomas'—I wasn't sure what it meant but it sounded well—

'Begone. If you have told the truth the fairies will bother you no more. Back to the house!' And I can't tell you how thankful we were," she concluded, "when he turned and shambled off, although he was still muttering 'It be the truth, ferlies. Thomas be an honest man.'"

So quaint had been Amanda's mimicry, so vivid her picture of the bewildered gardener, that her listeners, for the time being, seemed to have forgotten how deeply involved most of them were in this self-same mystery. As the amused young voice stopped, however, a change came over the various faces: Great-Uncle Herbert slumped back heavily in his chair, Mrs. Archer and Aunt Mildred exchanged frigid glances, while John Golding's dark, scowling face grew still darker. He moved restlessly.

"How much longer are we to be kept listening to a pack of silly schoolgirls?" he demanded truculently.

Mr. Simmonds alone was unperturbed.

"Now, now, my dear sir," he remonstrated gently. "We can forgive impatience in these young people, but you and I know the evidence must be heard. Continue, young lady," and he beamed amiably towards Amanda.

"I'll be glad to finish too," she confessed frankly, "and besides there isn't much more to tell. When we discovered that Griz—Griselda had disappeared we decided she must have gone back to look for Gaily—as she had—and then we thought possibly both of them had made for the Grange already. If they hadn't, then we argued they must have gone back to school, thinking we were there too. We were frightfully

tempted to do that—go back to school, I mean—but it seemed awfully cowardly when we knew Hazel Warnford was now at the Grange—that is, if Thomas's story were true. So we cut across by the back way through the grounds and were down below the window of Gaily's room in no time. We were tremendously thrilled to see that the room was lighted—and the only difficulty was to get in touch with whoever was there—whether Hazel, or Gaily, or Grizzly, or all three of them."

"And how did you?" put in Miss Steading surprisingly, as Amanda paused.

Slightly taken aback by this direct show of interest, Amanda stammered, "Well, as it turned out we didn't need to do anything, Miss Steading, for, as we were—er—scouting around for some possible way in, who should come creeping round from the back of the house but Hazel Warnford herself!"

In the dramatic little silence that ensued Miss Steading evidently determined to carry on the inquiry. She turned her gaze upon the supposed Hazel Warnford.

"And how had *you* managed to get out?" she demanded.

"I had Gaily's sister, Margaret, to thank for that," responded the real Gaily More. "I don't know how she knew I was there, but when I had practically given up all hope of getting out, and was simply in the depths of misery wondering what was going to happen, and what it was all about, I heard a rustle outside my bedroom door, and next moment an envelope was pushed underneath. In the envelope was a thin key

to open my own room—I was of course locked in—and a note directing me to a back staircase where I would find the door at the foot open. The note was signed ‘Margaret’. As I say, the relief was tremendous, but how she knew I’ve no idea.”

“I can help you there,” put in Aunt Mildred’s surprisingly calm voice. “I was determined to stop this plan of Dad’s, if I possibly could keep it from going any further, so I enlisted Margaret’s help. She thought she was writing to her sister, Gaily, for somehow she had become suspicious of Dad’s plan to pass her off as Hazel Warnford, and, not to complicate matters any further, I let her believe that. She wrote the little note, therefore, after Mrs. Archer had gone—poor girl, I had to waken her to do it—and I myself slipped it, with the key, under the door. At the time I didn’t wish to come into the picture at all—for I had hoped to stop the whole business, but now that it has all come out, I may as well clear up that point too.”

Great-Uncle Herbert looked as if the world could hold no further disillusion for him. His glance, as his daughter finished speaking, was bewildered, incredulous, and—Hazel again, in spite of herself, found herself pitying him—pathetically old.

There was no pity, however, in the look that John Golding cast upon him. His eyes were venomous.

“And now have we finished?” he exclaimed angrily. “Hasn’t it been proved to your satisfaction that all this trouble has been caused by that meddlesome old man there, trying to pass off an impostor, just to get money that he evidently doesn’t need? Hasn’t it been proved”—he was thumping the arm of his chair in

his impatience and spite—"proved beyond all question that that is my ward, Hazel Warnford? That she *has* been, and *is*, under the guardianship of my sister and myself—as she will now remain till she is twenty-one? And that, therefore"—he now addressed himself directly to Mr. Simmonds—"the five thousand pounds per annum must legally be paid to us?"

"H'm!" said Mr. Simmonds non-committally, and again "H'm!" but Miss Steading was not disposed to leave it at that.

"You may be right," she said in a dangerously even voice, "and it certainly would seem that this is your ward," and she looked towards Gaily More, "but I certainly hope for her sake that there may still be some way of keeping her out of your clutches. However, what you have not explained yet—and what I feel badly *needs* explaining—is your treatment of *my pupil*, Abigail More. What was your reason for attacking and attempting to kidnap *her*?"

Mr. Simmonds sat up with a jerk, and his air of detachment vanished.

"Exactly, madam," and he swung round to beam on the headmistress. "The very point on which I also wish enlightenment."

John Golding shifted uneasily, and his cunning eyes fell before their accusing glances.

"That was a mistake," he muttered, "and I didn't attack her. She was so startled when I came behind her that she started away from me and somehow slipped, and in falling struck her head and knocked herself unconscious. I thought, of course, that she was Hazel Warnford, and my sister had warned me

that those people at the Grange"—he looked balefully across at Great-Uncle Herbert and Aunt Mildred—"were up to something. She suspected that her invitation to dinner was just a ruse to get her out of the way and begged me to come down and keep an eye on the girl during her absence. I had the dev—"—he checked himself hurriedly—"the dickens of a job getting here, and even as it was I was too late, but I wasn't to know that, and when the—the accident to her head occurred, I admit I acted very foolishly—lost my own head in fact. I carried her down the back stairs to the laundry in the kitchen premises, and left her there till I went for my car. I intended taking her to my sister's flat in London and handing her over to the housekeeper. She was to have gone there the next day—to-day that is—in any case, but you've heard how that little minx of a typist double-crossed me? It served her jolly well right to have a smash. She was mighty lucky to get off as lightly as she did," he finished vindictively.

Miss Steading looked at him distastefully but left it to Mr. Simmonds to proceed.

"H'm!" said that gentleman again, but this time there was a wealth of grimness in the sound. "It seems to me that *you* are very lucky not to be accounting for this in a court of law. I'm not too sure," and he looked questioningly at Miss Steading, "that we'll be able to keep it out of court, as it is."

Aunt Mildred looked appealingly at the headmistress.

"Oh, I do hope——" she began.

Miss Steading nodded with a touch of sympathy.

"I hope too, Mr. Simmonds," she said, "that things can be settled without that. There would be a great deal of undesirable publicity for everybody."

"Not to speak of your pupils roaming about at midnight," put in John Golding spitefully. "What would the general public think of that?"

If anything further had been needed to turn Miss Steading against him, that would have done it a hundred-fold.

"I admit," she responded with great dignity, "to being greatly distressed regarding that matter, but it will be thoroughly gone into, and you can rest assured that there will be no recurrence of such behaviour."

Her pupils, meeting her steely eyes, looked forward to the thorough inquiry with sinking hearts.

Mr. Simmonds had been rustling the papers in his brief-case again.

"Well," he said, "it will be necessary for me to interview separately the various people implicated in this—er—'tangled web' I think we might call it, for there are many points still to be cleared up, but I agree that it will be better in every way if the difficulties can be composed without recourse to the law. Meantime, however," and he smiled kindly upon Gaily More, "I propose to acquaint this young lady briefly with the details of her fortune. She has been kept waiting long enough."

CHAPTER XXIV

The dreaded Moment Arrives

Mr. Simmonds was as good as his word; he wasted no time over unnecessary details.

"This large fortune," he said, "comes from an uncle, your father's brother, in Australia. He died just about a year ago, and since then an advertisement has appeared in the Australian press, an advertisement which indicated all too plainly that a great deal of money was involved if only Miss Hazel Warnford were forthcoming. That advertisement, and the inquiries that it elicited, inspired the cupidity of your friends here, and caused all the trouble we have been hearing of to-day."

"But the advertisement didn't say anything about money," ventured Hazel. "It just asked for information—if anybody could give it."

"Quite so," agreed the lawyer amiably, "but that was the advertisement *my* firm inserted, once the affair had been entrusted to us—and it is thanks to that, that I am here to-day, and that I hope we have now come to the end of our difficulties."

"I hope so too," growled John Golding. "Can you not go on?"

"Your uncle and your father had not corresponded for years," continued Mr. Simmonds imperturbably, "and the former was unaware of your parents' tragic death. He knew, however, of your existence, and having

no family of his own, left his huge fortune in trust for you. The five thousand pounds per annum was to go to your parents till you attained your majority, but failing them, to those guardians in whose care you were, on your thirteenth birthday. He made this will just before he died, and I'm inclined to think he was a little 'out' in regard to your years. I imagine he thought you had already attained that great age. Mr. Golding," he looked coldly at the scowling face opposite, "was in a position to know that you hadn't—hence his interest in assuming your guardianship. Just how Mr. and Miss Fenniston were aware——" he hesitated and looked questioningly towards them.

Great-Uncle Herbert made no sign of having heard but Aunt Mildred again volunteered an explanation. "We knew her parents years ago when she was just a child," she said, "but we lost trace of her after their death. Indeed, we had forgotten all about her until unfortunately my father saw the advertisement you referred to in an Australian paper. I don't know why, as I've already told you, but he decided that the real Hazel Warnford must be dead—when she was being advertised for in that way, and he hit upon the unhappy scheme of passing off my niece, Gaily More, in her stead."

She paused, and her face was drawn with worry.

"I know it seems absolutely inexcusable," she went on, "but I assure you I would never have allowed it to become a fact. I hate to take up any more of your time but I'd just like to tell you why I pretended to agree to it: I wanted to bring my niece, Gaily, home. And in spite of all the worrying things that have been

happening"—she raised her head, and looked round with a touch of defiance—"I'm still glad of that, and you would be too, if you knew how her invalid sister, Margaret, has been pining for her."

"Er—quite so," murmured Mr. Simmonds in the uncomfortable little silence that followed. "However, we shall no doubt go into that later, and I'm sure we shall all—er—take a sympathetic view of the case. Now——" He assumed a brisk and cheerful tone and once more addressed Gaily More.

"Well, young lady, do you think you have grasped the essentials? You realize that you are now a very wealthy young person indeed, and that all the difficulties and troubles have vanished away?"

His voice was so rich with satisfaction that Brownie, Amanda, and Grizzy were already smiling happily upon the new heiress.

"Come now," he encouraged, as one talking to a shy child. "No more difficulties, surely?"

The expected moment, the dreaded moment, had arrived. Gaily More and Hazel exchanged unhappy glances, but there was no evading the difficulty further.

"There is," said Gaily More nervously, "one big difficulty still. You see, I am *not* Hazel Warnford."

"You—*what*?" gasped both Miss Steading and Miss Ringer simultaneously, and a wave of excitement swept through the room.

"Say that again!" snarled John Golding, all the complacency that had been gradually sweeping over him as things had gone more and more in his favour vanishing in a second.

"Say that again," he repeated wrathfully, "you little idiot!"

Now that the secret was out, Gaily More seemed to have recovered her composure.

"It's true," she affirmed, "I can say it again if you wish. I am *not* Hazel Warnford."

Mr. Simmonds found his voice, though even it shook slightly.

"You are not Hazel Warnford?" he repeated. "Then who——" but before he could finish his question, every eye had followed the direction of Gaily's glance.

"Abigail More!" gasped Miss Steading. "But——" she broke off in perplexity.

"Gaily!" Even Brownie's awe of the headmistress could not keep her from the delighted exclamation. Amanda, Grizzly, and she gripped each other's hands in suppressed excitement, and gazed on Hazel with dancing eyes.

Next moment a perfect babel of voices broke out. John Golding rampaged and stormed.

"I don't believe it. I simply don't believe it!" he kept repeating, while Great-Uncle Herbert, in a slightly dazed tone of triumph, addressed his daughter.

"So she *was* Hazel Warnford after all! What did I tell you, Mildred?"

As for Mr. Simmonds, he almost dropped his precious brief-case in his bewilderment.

"Bless my soul!" he ejaculated, rising to his feet. "Is there no end to this?"

With an effort Miss Steading pulled herself together.

"Will you all kindly resume your seats," she was beginning, her usually calm and precise voice raised to what in her was almost a 'bawl'. "Will you——?" but once again she was interrupted—this time by the ringing of a bell.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed. "I had no idea it was that time already. That is the bell for lunch."

The company who had just settled down, again started to their feet.

Miss Steading frowned, looked at Mr. Simmonds, and above all at her dishevelled pupils. Impossible to let *them* loose on the rest of the school like that. Besides, they'd have it turned topsy-turvy in no time with their wild and exaggerated tales. She crossed to the side-room.

"You girls had better wait in here meantime," she commanded, and somewhat dejectedly they obeyed.

Their dejection vanished, however, had she been there to witness, as soon as the door closed.

"Oh, Gaily!" and Brownie swooped down upon Hazel and positively hugged her; "so it's you who are to have the missing millions after all!"

"And now we'll have to remember to call you Hazel after this," laughed Grizzy, vigorously shaking one hand, while Amanda dealt with the other.

"No wonder you were always hesitating over the names," she remarked. "I often noticed it but couldn't understand why."

"I don't know how she managed to keep it up for so long," put in the real Gaily More, her face crinkling in a smile. "I almost came a cropper to-day first go off."

"But why on earth did you do it?" demanded Grizzy. "I'm simply dying to hear."

"So am I," said Brownie, "but I'm even more dying of starvation. Do you think the head will let us have any lunch, or will she be too mad? Maybe this will be part of the punishment," she added gloomily, "and I could eat anything I'm so ravenous—except perhaps rice pudding."

"Oh, I'd love some rice pudding, but I believe I could even enjoy cabbage to-day." Amanda's voice was infinitely pathetic.

Meantime in the study, lunch was also the subject of conversation. Miss Steading, after an inquiring glance at Mr. Simmonds, proffered a general invitation.

"Perhaps you will all stay, and we can finish our discussions after lunch?"

Her visitors, however, were already on their feet, Aunt Mildred and Mrs. Archer both protesting that they could not put her to so much trouble. Lunch would be waiting for them at home: Mr. Simmonds could join them, or they would come back later—everything, indeed, and anything if only they could gracefully take their leave.

By no means unwillingly, Miss Steading allowed herself to be persuaded. Mr. Simmonds would have lunch at school, but would visit the Grange and Clevedon in the afternoon, and with at least a show of politeness on the part of everyone except John Golding, who still scowled and muttered that "he wasn't convinced; far from it", they took their departure.

Miss Steading once more threw open the side-

room door, and surveyed the apprehensive inmates coldly.

"Miss Ringer," she said, "will you please go with those girls while they tidy themselves? I shall expect you and them back for lunch in about ten minutes."

The form-mistress bowed and led the way from the room, meekly followed by her five charges. Relief tempered their dread of the coming interview: at least they were not going to be starved!

"I thought it was maybe just because Mr. Simmonds was there that she was so decent," Brownie commented later, "and that we'd 'get it in the neck' afterwards."

"That's probably still to come," laughed Grizzly, "but you'd 'get it in the neck' anyhow, if Bells heard you." But Brownie was unperturbed.

"Not a bit of it. Bells loves me. Think of the way she ladled rice pudding on to me."

"She'd probably heard you say you didn't like it," chuckled Amanda.

"Oh, but to-day's was different. Expect Miss Steading has a special kind made for herself."

"Expect nothing of the sort," retorted Grizzly. "It was just that you were hungry. But, I say, I wonder when Hazel and Gaily are coming. They must be having a frightful pow-wow with the head."

The three girls were in their study, with orders to remain there till Miss Steading gave them permission to leave, and truth to tell, they were not unwilling for once to obey orders. Amanda, indeed, on the chair by the fire was almost asleep.

Brownie gently discharged a cushion at her.

"Wake up!" she urged, expertly dodging its return. "You can't possibly go to sleep till the heiress comes back."

"I should think not," put in Grizzy, stifling a yawn. "Imagine being let off lessons for the day, and wasting the time sleeping."

"Who's sleeping?" protested Amanda unconvincingly. "I'm just thinking how frightfully sickening it must have been for Gaily More—the real Gaily, I mean. We're going to be horribly mixed up with them for a day or two, aren't we?"

"You're getting a bit mixed up already. What must have been sickening?" laughed Brownie.

"Oh yes—to have all that money presented to her on a plate as it were, and then to have to admit she wasn't her."

"Tut! tut! That grammar offends my ears!" put in Grizzy, in Miss Ringer's most magisterial voice.

"What should it be then?" But as Grizzy offered no suggestion, she repeated: "I think it must have been awfully feeding, but I'm terribly glad it was our Gaily who was the real Hazel after all!"

"*Ra-ther!*" Brownie and Grizzy were in complete agreement over that.

"Do you think," the latter went on, "they'll be put in jail?"

"Gaily and Hazel?" asked Brownie in shocked tones.

"No, stupid! Great-Uncle Herbert, of course, and that horrible Mr. Golding."

"I'd put the Golding man in for life," said Amanda decidedly, "but not Great-Uncle Herbert. He's rather

an old pet, really, and I don't think he meant any harm."

"He can be pretty beastly—old pet or not," retorted Grizzy. "You should have seen him when he caught us this morning," and she gave a life-like shudder.

"I wonder if he'll get the money," Brownie remarked interestedly. "After all, Hazel's been under his guardianship——"

"Yes, but not as Hazel," put in Amanda.

"A good legal point that, Amanda. Sometimes I think you have a head on your shoulders—if you would just use it." Grizzy's imitation of Bells was masterly, but unfortunately it coincided with Miss Ringer's own entrance.

"I'm *always* sure that you have a *tongue* in your head, Griselda, but it would be often much better if you didn't use it," she remarked crisply, but her eyes were twinkling.

The abashed Grizzy struggled to her feet from the rug where she had been sitting.

"I—I—" she stammered, but as the form-mistress's twinkle became a fully developed smile, she recovered her assurance.

"I'm sorry, Miss Ringer," she apologized, "but it *was* a good point, wasn't it, that Hazel wasn't under Great-Uncle Herbert's guardianship as Hazel—but as Gaily More?"

"Dear me, a budding Portia!" laughed Miss Ringer. "Well, as a matter of fact that is one of the things that Mr. Simmonds has just been discussing, and Miss Steading suggested that I might tell you the

main points, for she and the girls are really too exhausted to go over them again."

"Cheers!" exclaimed Brownie. "Are you going to tell us everything?" And Amanda, forgetting her weariness, leapt up and ushered the visitor to the chair of honour.

"Well, perhaps 'everything' is rather a tall order," smiled their form-mistress, "but I'll do my best. You already heard at lunch about the stupid interchange of identities in the train? I don't know what they were thinking of," and for a moment her voice recovered all its customary disapproval.

Grizzy laughed. "I know it was an awfully silly thing to do," she admitted, "but what fun we'd have missed if they hadn't."

"You bet!" said Brownie enthusiastically, and Miss Ringer's brows contracted with a pained expression.

Amanda came to the rescue.

"But why did Gaily More want to change over? Did you hear that, Miss Ringer? It was Gaily, wasn't it, that had the brain-wave—not Hazel?"

There was no doubt of Miss Ringer's profession this time.

"Just foolish pride," she exclaimed. "I'm afraid she must be a very determined, headstrong girl."

"But why?" persisted Amanda.

"She had been in an orphanage where she had really been very happy, but she had always been resentful that she had been left there. That, of course, appears to have been that strange old Mr. Fenniston's doing again."

"Great-Uncle Herbert?" chuckled Brownie. "But what was his idea?"

"The wrong sort of pride too, I think. He had disapproved greatly of his elder daughter's marriage, and when she and her husband both died and left their two children quite unprovided for, I gather that he refused at first to do anything about them. Incidentally, he would never allow himself to be called their grandfather. That's why he has always been known as Great-Uncle Herbert. Miss Fenniston managed to persuade him to allow the elder girl, Margaret, to be brought to the Grange—she is an incurable invalid, I understand—but he insisted on the younger—Gaily More that is—being kept in an orphanage school, although Miss Fenniston and Margaret were continually pleading for her to be brought home. A strange character he must be," she commented, "for he's evidently quite well provided with this world's goods, and to look at he's just a very pleasant old gentleman."

"When he is good he is very very good," chanted Grizzy, "and when he is bad he is horrid!"

There was a general laugh.

"I believe that sums him up very well," the form-mistress was beginning again, when Amanda broke in.

"But did Gaily not want to leave the orphanage then?"

"She did, and she didn't. She had worked herself into such a state of resentment, that she felt if she could put off going to the Grange, where she had evidently not been wanted for so long, if she could put it off even for a week, she might think of some way of

escaping altogether. And that was why she led Hazel into this hare-brained scheme which has caused so much trouble. Poor child," Miss Ringer's voice softened, "I believe she was really contemplating running away."

"Well, she landed herself in a nice little mystery," laughed Grizzy. "What a shock it must have been when she discovered she wasn't going to school after all!"

"Yes, she thought at first poor Hazel had—er—is 'double-crossed her' the correct expression, Sheila?"

Brownie laughed.

"But why did that horrid Golding man change Hazel's plans?" she queried. "He had sent her off to St. Margaret's that very morning."

"I know," agreed Miss Ringer, "but she was evidently hardly away when he had word about her amazing fortune, and the pleasant little sum that was to come to her guardians. So he immediately 'phoned his sister, Mrs. Archer, telling her to meet her and—well, from then on I think you know more about it than I do. There's just one thing more, however, that the headmistress wished me to speak about," and she sat bolt upright in her chair, and her face assumed what they all knew as her "lecture" look. "Miss Steading is horrified, and so am I, at your dreadful behaviour in slipping out of the dormitory window at night. She——"

In the very nick of time, as the form-mistress was beginning to work herself up to the sternness that the occasion demanded—"Just when she'd been so decent too!" Grizzy remarked later—there came an unexpected interruption.

There was a shuffling of feet outside, and a subdued giggle, followed by a knock.

"Come in!" called Miss Ringer, but Brownie had already thrown open the door.

She almost staggered back with amazement.

"Thomas!" she gasped, and "Thomas!" echoed Amanda and Grizzy, leaping to their feet in delighted surprise.

Thomas it was—accompanied by a blushing and apologetic Annie.

"He had a message for Miss Hazel, miss," she explained to Miss Ringer's disapproving countenance, "and he said as how Mrs. Archer had told him she'd be with Miss Gaily More. So I brought him along, miss." Annie's voice faltered. "I know I should have asked permission, miss, but Thomas thinks the world of Miss Hazel and——"

"But she be'ant here." Thomas's stentorian tones made Miss Ringer jump, and unfortunately for her gravity, brought back Amanda's description of him that forenoon. Her lips began to twitch, and Brownie's suppressed giggle did nothing to help.

"No, Thomas," she was beginning bravely, when help unexpectedly arrived.

Dashing along the corridor, released at last from the exhausting inquisition in Miss Steading's study, came Hazel and Gaily More.

Thomas's face lit up with an amazing smile which disclosed his two remaining teeth, to Brownie's unspeakable delight.

"Here she be now!" he was exclaiming, when his eyes lighted upon the second figure.

"Eh, but—but—" he stammered wildly, "there be two of her! Annie, tell me quick. Be there really two, or be I still bewitched?"

Annie, alas, was in little better case than himself. She stood and gaped.

It was too much. Brownie's pent-up laughter burst forth, and next moment Miss Ringer and the others, including the two who had just arrived, were shaking with helpless mirth.

To make matters worse, Annie too began to giggle, and Thomas evidently realized he had no cause for alarm.

"He, he, he!" he bellowed, in the most ridiculous high pitch—the very opposite of what they would have expected from his speaking voice. "He, he, he!" and he rocked from side to side in a veritable paroxysm.

Miss Ringer surreptitiously wiped her eyes, and with a great effort pulled herself together.

"Wh—what is your message, 'Thomas?'" she managed to bring out with reasonable dignity.

Thomas checked himself on an upper screech.

"I were to give these scarves back to Miss Hazel," he volunteered, holding out a small parcel, but then went off into a fresh spasm. "He, he, he! To Miss Hazel, but I be danged if I know which of them two she be. There never was nobbut one before."

"That will do, Thomas. If you have no further message to give, Annie will take you to the kitchen for a cup of tea——"

"Oh, but I have. There be this parcel as well, but you'd better take it, ma'am, and give it to Miss Hazel yourself, for I can't but be seeing two of her. They

ferlies have made a rare fool of Thomas to be sure." He looked as if he were about to lapse into his former gloom at the thought of his "bewitchment", but instead began to snigger again.

"I'll be right glad of a cup of tea, ma'am, thank'ee. He, he, he! Mebbe I'll be seeing two of them as well!" and with this dazzling flight of wit he shambled off down the corridor with Annie, leaving his audience speechless with mirth.

CHAPTER XXV

Strange Behaviour of the Moon

Tea was practically over in the study.

"It was jolly decent of Mrs. Archer to send that cake," Grizzy commented, swallowing her last piece regretfully.

"M'm, a peace offering, I suppose," said Brownie, helping herself to another slice.

"She *was* jolly decent, you know," put in Gaily More earnestly.

"So was Aunt Mildred to me," affirmed Hazel. "I'm glad that Mr. Simmonds thinks the five thousand pounds for this year can be divided between them. It seems the fairest way."

"Is that what's going to happen?" Amanda was interested. "But what about from now onwards? Who's to be your guardian?"

"And rake in the shekels?" completed Brownie inelegantly.

Hazel and Gaily exchanged an amused glance.

"Shall I tell them?" asked Hazel, and as the other nodded, went on:

"Well, we think it's just going to go on like that. Gaily and I——" She broke off. "You can't think how lovely it is to be able to speak about us by our right names. I was always getting mixed up!"

"I know," said Amanda. "I noticed it often—but I hadn't the slightest idea why."

"Yes, but go on," prompted Grizzy. "We're all ears," and wagged hers in evidence—an accomplishment greatly envied by Brownie.

"Oh yes," continued Hazel, "Gaily and I have both had the same sort of lonely life up till now, and in spite of those last weeks being so awful in a way, we've both agreed that they've been frightfully thrilling, and that we've really enjoyed them."

"Hear! Hear!" put in Brownie. "So have we."

"Well, to make a long story short, we're both going to stay on at school, but divide our holidays between Aunt Mildred and Mrs. Archer, who will be joint guardians. It's settled—practically—as far as I'm concerned, and I don't think Great-Uncle Herbert will make any more fuss as regards Gaily, but even if he does——" Hazel checked herself. It was obvious that she did not wish to flaunt her wealth in any way. "It won't matter," she finished simply.

Gaily threw her a grateful glance and for a moment there was silence, but the irrepressible Brownie could never remain quiet for long.

"You won't have lonely lives after this, anyway," she chuckled. "We'll see to that."

The bell for prep rang and they grinned at each other luxuriously.

"Isn't it marvellous not to have to go?" yawned Grizzly. "I wonder if the form are missing us. They'll be simply mad that we're skipping all this work."

"It'll be our turn to be mad when we go back to it to-morrow," warned Amanda. "If I know Bells, she'll be making us do double to make up for it. I hope you're not frightfully brainy, Gaily? Hazel's a bit of a worry to us. She just won't stop answering the Ringer's questions, and that keeps her always looking in our direction."

Gaily More laughed.

"I've answered so many questions to-day, I'll not give you any bother that way for ages," she said, "and I imagine Hazel feels much the same."

"I do." Hazel's voice was full of laughter. "But don't believe that stuff about me. Amanda's the brains of the firm. Without her we'd never have solved the Mystery of Gaily More."

"Which was really the Mystery of Hazel Warnford," countered Brownie.

"Oh," yawned Amanda, "I'm so sleepy, I'm going to bed. Miss Steading said we were to go early."

The chorus of yawns that greeted her words was answer enough. With one accord they trooped up to the dormitory.

"Thank goodness, we don't have to go rescuing anybody to-night," said Grizzly some ten minutes later, as she stood in her pyjamas ready for bed. She moved to the window and drew aside the curtain.

"Gosh!" she exclaimed in a voice worthy of Brownie.

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"I be bewitched like Thomas. The moon's got stripes on it!"

There was a general crowding to the window.

"Gosh!" repeated Brownie, with a sleepy chuckle.

"Miss Steading hasn't wasted much time. We'll go no more a-roving—she's had bars put on already!"



